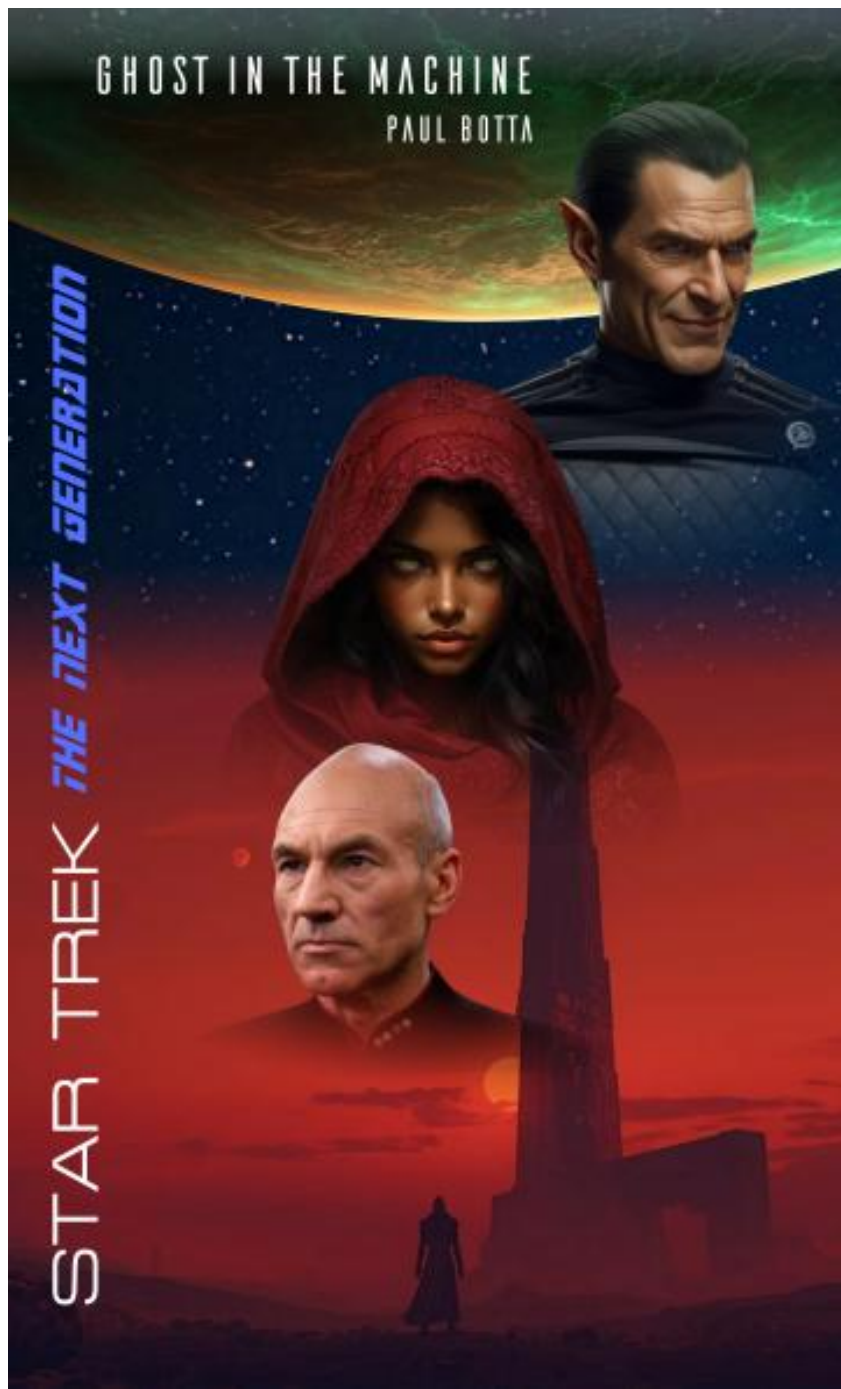


GHOST IN THE MACHINE
PAUL BOTTA

STAR TREK *THE NEXT GENERATION*



STAR TREK

GHOST IN THE MACHINE

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Historian's Note

"The events now referred to as 'The Wendorian Reclamation' transpired in the year 2370, following the Borg incursion into Federation space that was led by the Soong-type android known as Lore."

CHAPTER ONE

The incoming signal was weak. The transmission of Lieutenant DeCristo succumbed to the akreonic plasma that emanated from the planet below. The roar of interference filled the *Leviathan's* bridge, challenging the subdued hum of the venerable freight ship.

The orange world of Wendor returned to the viewscreen, bolts of akreon traversing its upper atmosphere. Captain Sydell scowled at the disruption, his fist hammering the rest of his command chair like a gavel.

“Damn it, Dammon,” barked Sydell. “Get the away team back online. I don’t care if you need to rebuild the entire communication array by hand. This is a Federation ship, not a cadet training mission”.

The rest of the *Leviathan's* bridge simply ignored Sydell’s outburst, even if Dammon could not. He anchored both hands upon his comm station, making sure that his Trenadarian fur was hidden from Sydell’s view. One glimpse of the radiating follicles would have telegraphed the alien’s sensory scrutiny of his troubled captain.

Sydell’s cyclothymic behavior was nothing new. Maybe even expected – a consequence of his years of rehabilitation. But Sydell’s increasing tension weighed upon the bridge like the billowing akreonic clouds that tyrannized the planet below.

“Captain, the akreon is dampening the away team’s signal at their source. I should note that despite our setbacks, we have significantly progressed well ahead of the *Hood's* initial exploration,” Dammon said, straightening his tunic with the full authority of his sixteen years of service as a Starfleet officer.

Sydell acknowledged with a prolonged sigh and began to soothe himself by methodically rubbing his palms against each other.

Kel’s fur calmed. After all, Sydell was a career military commander, not a scientific one. Impatience was an evolutionary advantage. No need to overreact.

With a brilliant flash and a loud snap, DeCristo reappeared upon the main viewer.

“Report.”

DeCristo frowned. “We’re beginning to experience trouble with the sensor array. Up until now it’s been about the only thing that the akreon has left alone,” he said. “There’s nothing wrong with it that I can

detect. I've personally run the diagnostics myself. Several times. The only conclusive findings of the day are some meteorological data that we ran for Dr. Creet."

"Any update on the exploration of the lower levels?"

"Nothing," regretted DeCristo, "They haven't been very successful down there. For every two steps we gain, the akreon sets us back one."

Sydell frowned. "How's life support holding up?"

"The system is getting more temperamental, Captain," DeCristo reported. "The oxygen ratio is falling. The air quality can get pretty thin down here. I thought once we reached our current depth, we'd be free of the akreon. The system is just holding together with little more than spit and bandages at this point."

The transmission crackled. "...also having increasing problems with the food replicators," DeCristo continued. "All the food is being processed as one big tasteless lump. It's barely edible."

Sydell continued to rub his palms as if trying to invoke a warmth that had long since departed. "Recommendations?"

"I think we will know more within the next forty-eight hours, but we should prepare for contingencies. We may want to consider scraping our current mission. We can rendezvous with the *Equestrian* next week and commandeer some of their auxiliary processors," DeCristo suggested. "If we can get our hands on some fresh equipment, we might be able to patch it in with our network, and we can let this stuff soak in valbaliu baths in the meantime."

A wry smile crossed Sydell's face after a noticeable pause. "As a xenologist, Lieutenant, you are undoubtedly familiar with the work of Loraqia D'Sorell."

"Of course, Captain," DeCristo answered. "Her research on the Pallum Ka Hai is required studies at the Academy."

"I had the pleasure of meeting her, shortly before her death," continued Sydell. I asked her a single question – I asked how she was able to endure the years of bitter winters and grueling summers – endure all the sacrifices her accomplishments tasked of her. From living in mud huts and having little more to eat than live muuchorin."

The hair on Kel Dammon's hands began to twitch again.

“And would you like to know her reply?”, asked Sydell, closing his eyes to enhance his memory.

Sydell paused and took a deep breath, the oxygen igniting his voice. “Life is filled with the things we could have done. History is filled only with what have.”

DeCristo remained silent, confused.

“When the time comes and you are asked the same question, will you say that as you stood upon the threshold of discovery, you turned back because the air was too thin and the food was not to your liking?”

“But Captain...”

“You were hand-picked by me to lead this mission. Now lead it. Success is your one singular option. If you disappoint me, I’ll make sure you end up cleaning food replicators for the remainder of your career. Get the job done. Are we clear?”

Before DeCristo could respond, the akreon struck again and truncated the transmission, filling the bridge with the hiss of interference – its chaotic strobe casting over the bridge as Dammon braced for another outburst from the captain. But Sydell remained silent, almost serene.

Alone, the *Leviathan*’s captain confronted the adversity of the static. As his eyes slowly cooled, the blackness within them returned. The image of Wendor returned to the main viewer. Its blood orange glow radiated upon Sydell’s face, anointing him with a halo of martial splendor.

As he approached Ten-Forward, Will Riker smiled to himself. While playfully volleying a small gift between his hands, he recalled a warm evening upon Betazed and a gentle breeze that carried the spray of the Opal Sea. Riker was surprised at how fresh the memory seemed, despite its age. It was a long time ago, long before the *Enterprise* and his rapid ascension through the ranks of Starfleet.

It was exactly ten years ago and in celebration of the very same occasion.

It was the time of year when the arulla trees were in full bloom, a celebration that lasted for only three days, but marked the beginning of spring in Betazed’s northern hemisphere. Before withering, the purple

flowers exuded a sweet and tangy fragrance that filled the otherwise unremarkable tree. Above any other association, that single aroma reminded him of Deanna Troi. She had been the first passion of his youth, even before his dreams of commanding a starship.

Despite the resolutions that time had since exacted, the First Officer of the *Enterprise* afforded himself a little nostalgia.

“Will!” a familiar voice called from behind. Riker turned and waited as Captain Picard hastened to join him.

“Captain,” greeted Will. “I’m glad I’m not the only late arrival.”

Picard offered only an awkward smile while absently shifting a silver gift box between his hands. He was visibly relieved to have intercepted his First Officer just outside their destination, reminding Will just how uncomfortable the captain could be at these informal gatherings.

“I appreciate you permitting me a few minutes away from the bridge,” said Riker. “I’m only going to stay for a piece of birthday cake.”

“Nonsense, Number One,” dismissed Picard. “We have more than six hours before we rendezvous with the *Merrimac*. Stay as long as you like.”

“The captain is always right,” Will conceded before offering the lead to Picard.

“Besides, Deanna will blame me if you left her party prematurely,” the captain predicted.

Inside Ten-Forward, an unusually bright light replaced the otherwise subdued ambiance. Festive decorations hung along all the walls and ceiling, accentuated by countless balloons and streamers. More than fifty of the ship’s crew moved freely between the guest of honor and the dessert bar.

They placed the presents on the gift table and headed towards the hub of the crowd.

After some effort, Will spotted Deanna among a small clique towards the rear of the lounge. Despite a ridiculous party hat, she was as beautiful as ever. He couldn’t temper the second wave of nostalgia that flooded him.

“Can I get you something to drink, Number One?” offered Picard.

“Yes. I think that I’ll have a Tarocca with chopped ice,” Riker requested. The captain nodded, obviously pleased with Will’s selection and appearing to be contemplating changing his own. As Picard departed

into the crowd, Will observed Worf sitting alone, leaning over an undersized table. Riker approached the Chief of Security and smiled at the unusual sight of the enormous Klingon devouring a large piece of cake.

“Lieutenant,” Will greeted with a grin.

“Commander,” acknowledged the Security Officer, unwilling to part from his feast long enough to raise his head. He paused only to drink from a tall glass of milk, revealing an ample amount of cake matted in his beard.

Perhaps the scene wasn’t that odd after all, Riker concluded. Worf had been reared upon Earth since childhood and was exposed to the full complement of human customs. In many ways, Worf was better assimilated in the social functions of humans than the captain.

Picard returned and handed one of the two glasses of Tarocca to Riker. “Where is Mr. LaForge?” he asked while performing a second inventory of the room. “I wanted to discuss the recent efficiency ratings of the warp field generators.”

“Commander LaForge was here, but he left to locate Commander Data,” reported Worf.

“It’s not like Data to miss a party,” Will observed with a curious tone.

As the small group behind them began to disband, Deanna discovered the new arrivals. She smiled and began to navigate her way through the crowd with Dr. Crusher in tow.

“Hi Will,” she warmly greeted.

“Happy birthday, Counselor,” Riker returned with a brief embrace.

She paused and gave him an inquisitive look before he released her. It was either her intuition or her empathic powers, Riker couldn’t tell. “Are you all right, Will?”

“Just thinking about the smell of arulla trees in full bloom,” he submitted with a nondescript smile.

She returned his smile with her own evocative stare. But he held her gaze for a moment too long, and her smile turned bittersweet.

The doors to Ten-Forward parted and Geordi LaForge returned to the party. Instead of being joined by Data, the Chief Engineer carried a gift. His VISOR juggled the numerous light sources of Ten-Forward as

he quickly surveyed the lounge for Deanna. As soon as he spotted the group, he grinned and hastened to join them.

“Here, Deanna. This is for you,” he said, offering her the package.

“It must be something very special if you want her to open it now,” noted Crusher with a playful smile.

Geordi blushed. “Actually, I don’t know what it is,” he said. “It’s from Data. He asked me to send his apologies for having to miss your party. He wanted me to give this to you and describe every detail of your reaction. I somehow didn’t think that you’d mind opening one a little early.”

“Certainly not,” she gleefully confirmed. Deanna neatly parted the gift’s lavender wrapping while the others looked on. With a dramatic flair, she slowly lifted the box’s cover. “It’s beautiful!”, she exclaimed while undoing the protective mesh wrap and gingerly lifting the piece from the box.

The crystalline object was just under a half meter in height and rested upon a rectangular wooden base. It was an opaque crystal, twisted into a three dimensional sigmoid – like a flame captured in moonlight.

“What is it?” asked Beverly.

“It’s a Calan Ti,” answered Troi in awe as she raised the talisman to the light. The bright glow of the lounge rippled along its highly polished contours. “It’s an ancient Bajoran symbol representing the eternal progression of life. I don’t know how Data ever came across one.”

“Then I can report back to him that you are pleased,” concluded LaForge.

“Of course. I can’t wait to thank him myself.”

While the others studied the Calan Ti and tested the object’s sheen, Picard turned to Riker. “Number One, what do you make of Mr. Data’s peculiar choice in gifts?” he asked in a hushed voice.

“I’m not sure, Captain,” shrugged Riker. “Lately, it would seem that Data has become rather... preoccupied.”

“Geordi, when was the last diagnostic run on Lieutenant Data?” Picard asked.

“Three days ago, Captain – his routine check. Standard results – all within normal operational parameters,” reported Geordi. “I don’t think that it’s any kind of malfunction. He just isn’t behaving like himself lately. He’s been asking a lot of questions about life and death.”

“Two days ago, he asked me about the Gorvus Horr, an ancient Klingon belief in reincarnation,” added Worf.

“You know?” reflected Dr. Crusher. “The other day, he asked me what happened when a human dies. At first, I thought he was seeking a clinical response, but then he asked me if I believed that all life forms have a soul.”

Picard slowly nodded to himself. “Geordi, where is Data now? What is keeping him from attending the party?”

“I’m not exactly sure what he’s up to, but he’s in his quarters,” LaForge reported. “He’s been spending considerable time researching the ship’s libraries. Because of Data’s rapid retrieval rate, his access time always shows up as an anomaly on the daily reports. He’s logged over sixty access hours in the last week alone. All that he would tell me is that he’s working on some kind of research project. He’s been pretty tight-lipped about it.”

There was a rattle of empty glasses from behind the group. “Maybe Data has reached a point in his programming where he needs to understand what lies beyond the universe,” offered a voice from behind the bar.

Picard turned while raising an eyebrow. “Guinan, are you suggesting that Data is engaged in some kind of religious pursuit?”

“Why not?” she defended, skillfully balancing a full tray of glasses that chattered in debate. “Data is an intelligent life form who has been displaced by the virtue that he’s an android. He has always tried to better understand his place among the scheme of things. Perhaps he’s just taking that exploration to the next logical step forward.”

Picard shook his head in rebuttal. “Since the first day that I met Data, his single objective was to understand humanity.”

Guinan’s smile twisted. “Maybe Data has finally reached the conclusion that being human just isn’t what it’s cracked up to be. Maybe he has set his sights upon loftier pursuits.”

As Picard and Guinan continued their debate, Geordi swiveled his chair to face away from the table and leaned into Riker to speak privately.

“Commander, do you think that the rumors floating around about a possible Romulan invasion has finally got to Data? Has him thinking about death?” Geordi asked in a hushed voice.

“I don’t know, Geordi. I guess that it’s a possibility,” Riker conceded. “But he has never reacted like this before. We’ve found ourselves in countless life-threatening situations that were more than just rumors and speculations.”

“Well, I’ve been hearing more and more that confirms those rumors,” confided LaForge. “There’s definitely something happening on Romulus. They’re up to something.”

“I know,” Will sighed. “It’s been weighing heavily on my mind lately too. I guess that it could have the same effect on Data.”

The sudden sound of a communication’s hail truncated the speculation.

“Lieutenant Corson to Captain Picard,” the voice summoned over the ship’s intercom. “I’m sorry to disturb you, Captain, but there’s an incoming message for you from Starfleet. Priority One.”

The captain’s body reflexively became taut with the rigidity of command. “Acknowledged,” he answered. “I’ll take it in my ready room.”

As Picard passed, he raised a curious eye towards Riker. Maybe being reminded of the whispers of an impending Romulan attack filled the First Officer with a strange sense of omen. Or maybe it was something else, something darker that stirred just beyond the periphery of consciousness.

“I think that I better return to the bridge,” Riker announced.

Kel Dammon tensed for a moment. Despite being alone in his quarters, he couldn’t fend off the feeling that he was being watched. He instinctively surveyed the room and released a nervous laugh when he confirmed what he already knew.

“Guilty conscience,” he concluded with a whisper. Somewhere in the distance, he heard a series of dull thuds that occasionally echoed from the haunts of the *Leviathan*’s labyrinthine corridors and Jefferies tubes.

For the third time in under five minutes, he checked the physical connections of his makeshift network. The output connector of the comm-interface was securely spliced into the accessory port of the computer terminal. With great care he tugged upon a small data card,

testing the security of the Krenin scrambling device within the interface's socket.

'Not exactly Federation issue,' he reminded himself. The Krenin communication templates, or kryptors as they were commonly known on the black market, were illegal aboard a Federation ship. However, when he had learned of the old freight ship's lack of sophisticated encryption capabilities, the little piece of contraband seemed well worth the risk – doubly so when Sydell was announced as the *Leviathan*'s captain.

Once he was confident that his network was functional, he activated the interface and then the display. He checked the time and frowned. It was nineteen hundred hours and three minutes. He knew that DeCristo was probably beginning to sweat from the delay.

An array of colors burst across the display as the kryptor randomized the transmission. A moment later and the disenfranchised shapes began to coalesce, until the anxious face of Lieutenant DeCristo became suddenly recognizable.

"Is anything wrong?" he asked.

"No. I just wanted to make sure that everything was secure," assured Kel.

DeCristo sighed. "Good. After last night I couldn't shake the feeling that someone was listening."

"Guilty conscience," Dammon repeated with full appreciation. "This setup is as good as we're going to get. The kryptors aren't unbreakable, but it would probably take the average computer a day and half to get through a few sentences. Hell, it would take this archaic system that long just to decipher one word. Plus, they have an amazing talent of making subspace communication appear like random microwaves."

"Well, you better hope that no one detects an unauthorized communication," warned DeCristo. "We'll both end up in the brig."

The screen rippled without warning as the akreon forced economy into the conversation.

"Don't worry about that. This isn't a *Galaxy*-class ship. There's not that kind of security protocol here... So, have you had time to think about it?"

"Well...", shifted DeCristo. "I don't know Kel. Granted, that little episode this afternoon didn't exactly win me over to his side. Maybe he's acting a little irrational but just put yourself in his place. He's got a lot

riding on the success of this mission. This is probably his last chance to redeem himself – his legacy.”

“My Trenadarian senses convince me otherwise. At least enough to justify lodging a formal grievance with Starfleet.”

DeCristo shook his head. “You sound so certain. I’d hate to subject him to any more disgrace after what he’s already been through.”

“I don’t plan to. After I submit the petition, it will be up to Dr. Selig to determine if he’s fit for command,” said Dammon.

“Then why are you waiting on me?” DeCristo asked. “Don’t misunderstand me, if he’s as bad as you say then he should not be in commanding any ship, even an old freight ship. But if you are planning to submit a formal grievance, then why are you trying to convince me? At the end of the day, I’m just a scientist. I’ve never been involved in any kind of Starfleet politics.”

Dammon conceded with a nod. It was a logical question. “Most of the *Leviathan*’s crew are kids, fresh out of the Academy. They’ll be afraid of the impact this will have upon their careers. They’ll crack under the pressure – Sydell can be very intimidating. You’re one of the senior officers and are leading the scientific expedition, which will carry a lot of weight. I need someone I can count on to back me up. There will be a question of my impartiality,” he punctuated with a peculiar tone.

DeCristo responded with an inquisitive expression. “What do you mean? Why would you be partial?”

Dammon turned from the screen and swallowed hard, trying to keep the words buried for just another moment. But he knew that he couldn’t suppress the truth any longer. “This isn’t the first time I served with Sydell. I was with him aboard the *Carthain*,” he confessed.

Mentally, Dammon counted to three – the typical time required for the impact of his revelation to be realized. DeCristo was right on cue.

“Kel...I’m sorry. I didn’t know,” soothed Decristo. “What was it like?”

Dammon smiled. Everyone offered their sympathy but immediately wanted a first-hand account of one of Starfleet’s most tragic episodes. “Well, it was pretty great at first. I was fresh out of the Academy, helping to design the Comm Radiant network.”

DeCristo nodded with a smile and a nod to Kel’s impromptu encryption rig. “That would explain your peculiar selection of toys.”

Kel nodded. “The *Carthain* was the first ship to employ the Comm Radiant architecture. About six days into the ship’s maiden voyage, the Communications Officer came down with a case of Curr’s fever and had to be relieved at Starbase 67. I was the only person within a hundred light years who had even heard of the Comm Radiant system. The next thing I know, I’m promoted to an officer and assigned to a prototype warship on my way into the heart of the Cardassian war. I was scared as hell. But it was also the most exhilarating moment of my life. To be under the command of Carden Sydell... After the Teylune campaign, he was a hero – a legend even. He was Starfleet to me – God and country rolled into one man.”

“I remember the sentiment,” corroborated the Lieutenant.

“Everything in between is more or less of a blur. But I remember the days of our final voyage very vividly. I remember how much he had changed after the accident with the *T’veve*. I’ll never forget his expression as we came within targeting range of the *Valkyrie*.”

DeCristo’s attention was lost within his own thoughts. He mentally superimposed Kel Dammon onto his own memories of the tragic events of the *Carthain*. He wondered how it must have felt to have been Dammon staring out from the *Carthain*’s bridge after Sydell had exacted his revenge. What was it like for Dammon to serve under Sydell’s command again?

“I had no idea.”

“I’ve kept it as much of a secret as I could. I even submitted a formal request to Starfleet to have that episode expunged from my record,” Dammon dismissed with a trivializing wave of his hand. “It’s not something that you want to be remembered as being a part of. Why do you think that I volunteer for these D-class missions? They’re not exactly career jumpers. I don’t want to see any more action. After the *Carthain*, I’m very content being a small fish in a small pond.”

“That’s what Milton said.”

The screen crackled again and the image of DeCristo blurred. The akreon provided no sympathy for Dammon’s past. The substance was as ambivalent as the dead world that lay under its sway.

“At the time, no one aboard the *Carthain* was willing to talk about it, although we could all see what was happening to him,” Kel lamented. “I guess none of us wanted to believe that the great Sydell was on a

collision course with his sanity. I just can't ignore how things might have been if one of us stood up and said something."

"Which is why you're making an issue of it now," concluded DeCristo. "You want to prevent the possibility of another incident."

Dammon nodded, his Trenadarian eyes swollen with regret.

"Kel, my only concern is that this mission isn't compromised, we already have enough problems," stipulated DeCristo. "Morale is already down. I don't want to create any more tension among the crew down here."

"Don't worry," Dammon reassured. "The mission won't be compromised. If Dr. Selig confirms our suspicions, Sydell will be confined to quarters. The *Equestrian* will be here in less than a week, and we'll turn him over to them."

"Well, I see that you've left nothing to chance. If you're sure that this will be handled with minimal impact here, then I'll back you on this," DeCristo promised.

Dammon smiled with a mix of gratitude and relief. Sydell wasn't the only one who had something in his past to make up for.

After the transmission blinked its conclusion, Dammon propped himself in his bed. Not exactly the quarters of a starship, but he was comfortable. As he slept, his dreams were filled with Sydell, the *Carthain*, and the sound of silent screams of those murdered in the vacuum of space.

CHAPTER TWO

Ten minutes had elapsed since DeCristo's distress signal was inexplicably terminated. At first, the bridge crew did their best to maintain their professional repose, patiently enduring each glacial moment until the signal was restored. But as the minutes continued to pass without promise, they began to exchange uneasy glances.

The akreon only permitted DeCristo one word, but it had been enough.

'HELP!'

Dammon tried everything within his arsenal of experience, but nothing could resurrect the transmission. It was just after midnight, and he was charged with the unenviable task of waking the captain from his sleep. Dammon wasn't sure which version of Sydell he would have to contend with. To his relief, Sydell sprang from his bed and hastened to the bridge in silence.

"Sir, the security team is standing ready in the transporter room," Dammon reported.

"Tell them to await my orders," said Sydell. "Let's delay the team for a few minutes and see if we can reestablish communications first. I need to know what I am sending those men into."

Dammon agreed with a nod. For a moment he was reminded of the resolute captain of his youth – the leader with the unwavering commitment to his crew and their safety.

But Sydell's face had aged beyond the fourteen years since the *Carthain*, the near black irises of his eyes had grown darker. They reminded Dammon of the cold eyes of the Rydian war hawks who vigilantly patrolled the vast perimeter of the penal colonies of Telnost III. They embodied the fiercest loyalty while also being notorious for eviscerating their masters without provocation.

And so did Sydell seem, at once both regal and savage – pious and pagan.

The view screen blinked, eliciting an immediate response from everyone on the bridge. Amid the haze of interference, DeCristo's distorted face appeared. The static yielded to the young Lieutenant's urgency.

"*Leviathan*, help! Please come in!" he pleaded.

“Status, Lieutenant.”

“Thank God!” DeCristo exclaimed. “Captain, requesting emergency rescue procedures. Something has killed half of my team, and I can’t establish contact with any of the others. There’s blood everywhere...”

The signal abruptly snapped, and the screen went black.

“Get that signal back, Dammon!” stormed Sydell. “There are - people dying down there. Get it back – *Now!*”

As Dammon’s Trenadarian fur reflexively responded to Sydell’s frustration – he finally understood why the akreon triggered him. The akreon injected chaos into Sydell’s delicately rehabilitated psyche as easily as it did into the equipment.

Dammon performed a cursory trace route and confirmed what he already suspected. This time, it wasn’t the akreon.

Kel’s fingers raced across his station trying to regain the lost signal when an unusual pattern suddenly chimed from his console. Since reaching orbit around Wendor, the chorus of notifications and alerts from his station remained unchanged. This melody was new and urgent. A warning.

Dammon reviewed the scans and parsed the readouts. He paused – shaking his head in disbelief.

The Trenadarian took several steps away from station. “Captain... Captain, the sensors have detected a...” Dammon returned to his console, hoping it would prompt him for the words.

“There was a sudden shift in the moon Terros, followed by an enormous akreon emission at zero-two-four, mark twenty-one. I’m detecting some kind of matter/antimatter reaction from those same coordinates. It’s measuring over two hundred thousand terawatts and increasing exponentially. It’s accelerating at such a rate that the sensors are unable to track it.”

“It must be the akreon,” Sydell dismissed. “It’s distorting the sensor readings. Run a diagnostic.” Dammon returned to his station and ran through a familiar cycle of commands. He met Sydell’s gaze and shook his head.

Sydell returned to the main viewer. There was no evidence of anything unusual.

Suddenly, the moon Terros quickly descended into view. Moving beyond its standard orbital speed – heading straight towards them on an intercept course.

“Shields up, Red Alert,” Sydell ordered. The wail of the alert filled the *Leviathan*’s bridge, echoing within the bulky craft.

Sydell’s grin was defiant. It chilled Dammon as he remembered the same grin as they descended upon the *Valkyrie* over a lifetime ago. It was if those two moments were in conjunction – as if time had revolved upon a circular plane, intersecting the same point in time.

Wendor’s second moon Terros maintained pursuit at a terrifying pace, its obsidian surface eerily reflecting the blood-orange glow of its host.

“Captain, there is no sensory information to explain the moon’s acceleration. There is no evidence of any means of propulsion” reported Dammon. “It is on a collision course with us.”

“Ensign Cove – get us out of here!” ordered Sydell. “Full speed. Set coordinates for the *Equestrian*”.

Terros continued to grow in the viewscreen. Cove entered and re-entered commands into the ship’s primary helm.

“The ship is not responding, Captain,” alerted Cove. “I am not detecting any tractor beam. She’s just not moving, sir”.

Sydell confronted the moon, the defiance etched upon his granite expression. The Red Alert continued to bellow its warning.

Terros continued its hunt. A tiny flash of majestic white fired from its surface – pulsating.

“Brace for impact!” shouted Sydell.

The *Leviathan* began to wildly shake – trapped within a maelstrom. As the ship trembled, the crew scrambled to secure their positions.

“Sheilds are failing, Captain!” Dammon shouted.

An intense blinding glow exploded upon the viewer, filling the bridge with a white-hot radiance. The temperature of the bridge quickly heated.

“Hull integrity has been compromised!”

“Dammon, send all telemetry data to Starfleet on an encrypted signal,” shouted Sydell. “All hands, brace for impact!”

The glow intensified until the bridge was consumed by it. The temperature kept increasing, flesh began to burn. The cracking sound of the failing hull filled the bridge with deadly thunder. Kel could no longer feel his fingers upon the console.

The crew screamed in agony. The light grew – continuing to surge into a maddening crescendo of power until only the blinding white remained.

The brilliant glow lingered upon Picard’s viewer before transitioning to darkness. His entire ready room dimmed in the afterglow. The staunch face of Admiral Peldin reappeared, probing Picard with his somber expression.

“I’m sorry to present it to you like this, Jean-Luc,” apologized Peldin. “But I wanted you to see the actual transmission for yourself, the way Starfleet received it.”

Picard agreed with a single nod, appreciating Peldin’s characteristic economy of words. The captain typically found the admiral’s laconic conversations refreshing. Today, however, Peldin’s mood lay withdrawn within the shadows of his administration.

“Has it been confirmed that the *Leviathan* was actually destroyed?” asked the captain. “Is it possible that the akreon only compromised the transmission that we just witnessed?”

“The ship’s destruction has been confirmed by the surveillance network that monitors the Neutral Zone,” Peldin replied, easing the creases of his bald ebony head. “Debris closely approximating the *Leviathan*’s mass has been identified trapped in orbit around Wendor.”

Picard withdrew into his chair with a sigh. His cup of Earl Grey had absently grown cold. “What of the scientific teams upon the planet’s surface?” he asked while tracing an absent finger along the rim of his cooled cup. “Has their status been confirmed?”

“Negative.”

“What is Starfleet’s assessment at this time?”

“Analysis is still underway, but there have been several hypotheses from our analysts. I have heard everything from abhorrent solar winds to old Ferengi space mines,” Peldin replied, dismissing the speculations with a simple wave of his hand. “The most probable theory is that the akreon caused some kind of malfunction in the ship’s sensors.

The *Leviathan* either collided with the moon Terros, or its reactor core was somehow compromised.”

“Admiral, is it possible that one of the scientific teams accidentally weakened the seals of an ancient hazardous waste site and triggered a massive spontaneous combustion? The very same thing occurred years ago upon Telkis II during a mining expedition.”

“Very possibly, Jean-Luc,” Peldin replied. It was clear that the admiral was seeking an unremarkable explanation, not possessing any zeal for the unknown.

Picard casually lowered his eyes while evaluating Peldin’s conduct. There was one obvious explanation that Peldin overlooked. The glaringness of its omission only ignited Picard’s suspicions of the admiral’s true agenda.

“Admiral, given Wendor’s close proximity to the Neutral Zone, I’m surprised that a Romulan explanation isn’t being considered,” observed Picard with contrived naiveté. “It would seem unlikely that they would cross over into Federation space and attack an old freight ship,” he conceded.

Peldin’s dismay returned. “Yes, it would. But it is possible that the Romulans have been using the Khuln system for other purposes. Six months before Wendor’s discovery, the system was so remote that it remained virtually ignored by the Federation. The very thought of a secret military outpost in the Federation’s backyard is causing considerable apprehension, coupled with all the political unrest that is echoed from Romulus.”

“I met Sydell at a Vulcan conference on Hared IV,” Picard reflected, intentionally shifting the conversation for Peldin’s benefit. “Prior to the Cardassian War,” he quickly appended. It was odd having to clarify that, but the War proved to be such a milestone in Sydell’s life that such a qualification was essential. “Had it not been for his discommendation, he would have easily captained the chair of any ship in the fleet.”

“Without contest,” agreed Peldin, dismissing Picard before returning to his agenda. “How familiar are you with Dr. Creet’s body of work concerning the Wendorians?”

“Quite well, actually,” replied the captain. “Dr. Creet lectured at the Academy when I was only a cadet. I had the pleasure of serving upon

the committee that turned those three days of lectures into required reading. Since then, I have followed his progress over the years. I was excited for him when the Wendorian home world was discovered. He is very passionate...”

Peldin interrupted, “I wasn’t aware of your enthusiasm for archeology, Captain. How much do you know of the Wendorians?”

“Well...,” Picard pouted his lower lip as his gaze drifted for a moment. “The first known artifacts were discovered upon Conorus VII just over a century ago during the first expedition of the system. The relics were the remains of what appeared to be an ancient colony, far too advanced to have been produced by any of Conorus’s indigenous cultures. Similar finds were uncovered over the next several decades, but because they were so scattered throughout the quadrant, no one identified them as belonging to the same species. Until Creet. He believed that the Wendorians sent emissaries throughout the galaxy, to serve as both teachers and guardians to the many fledgling worlds that they encountered. I remember that he once proposed that the Wendorians were a catalyst in Surak’s reformation of Vulcan. I don’t believe that the governing circles of Vulcan put much weight into it,” he concluded with a smile.

“What do you know of Creet’s theories concerning their fate?”

“It’s all conjecture,” qualified Picard. “There was a mass extinction event of some sort around two thousand years ago. A sizable meteor impact, a cataclysmic polar shift perhaps – something on a planetary level. Little could be substantiated of course, until their home world was discovered.”

“Well, the good doctor has made some new conclusions. But you can ask him for yourself. I want you to rendezvous with him on Sindar. Creet has spent the last three years there after discovering some nomadic tribe who claim they are the direct descendants of one of those Wendorian colonies. Ever since they learned of the *Leviathan*’s destruction, they have been filling Creet with omens of doom. According to him, they’re acting as if this was a sign of their apocalypse,” Peldin snorted while shaking his head with mild amusement. “Still Starfleet wants all possibilities considered before we prepare for a Romulan explanation. Personally, I think it’s all mystical nonsense but find out what you can.

Accept whatever assistance they offer, then immediately proceed to Wendor and find out what the devil happened out there.”

“At once.”

“One more thing, Jean-Luc,” added Peldin, momentarily attenuating his gruffness. “The *Leviathan* was an old freight ship recommissioned from the surplus depot at Qualor II and quickly refitted for this mission. Given Wendor’s proximity to the Neutral Zone, we didn’t want to formally send a Federation ship and attract any undue attention. The point is – that final transmission was sent on general subspace. That freight ship wasn’t equipped with any sophisticated communication encryption. If anyone in proximity to the Neutral Zone was listening, they picked up her signal too. Exercise full caution.”

Picard nodded slowly, appreciating the significance of the admiral’s implication. “Understood.”

Peldin bunched his lips and nodded a quick farewell. The older man seemed to expire as if he had overdrawn his daily ration of conversation. In an instant his image vanished from the small view screen and was replaced by the blue, white and black insignia of the Federation.

“Picard to Riker. Set a course for the Noborious system, Warp Eight,” Picard ordered.

“Course laid in, Captain,” reported Riker from the bridge.

“Engage.”

From the shadows of a now abandoned Ten-Forward, a lone figure gazed out the forward-facing windows as the *Enterprise* accelerated. The light from a thousand stars began to bend, their spectra filling the window with the iridescence of an ocean spray.

The universe was an ocean – vast and limitless, he concluded. It was an expanse that while teeming with life was itself abiotic.

He was forced to make a similar conclusion about himself. His journey brought him to a thousand worlds and a thousand civilizations, connecting him with thousands of life forms. He was surrounded by the richness of life without himself being truly alive.

Even the stars – the imperial beacons that were responsible for igniting life upon countless worlds – were little more than celestial

machines of fusion and thermal dynamics. They could offer nothing beyond their intended programming.

And like the stars, he was also constructed of durable matter and possessed the longevity to bear a thousand lifetimes. But he too would one day succumb to the indifferent grip of space.

He had studied so many cultures since joining Starfleet. Over the years, he focused upon their differences, using this juxtaposition to broaden his understanding of life. Now, he explored their commonalities. It was within this intersection that he hoped to understand life's true meaning.

So many cultures embraced the belief of an eternal existence, some spiritual residue that survives long after the physical body had ceased. When his circuits, biomechanics and positronic pathways ceased to function, would only the cold oblivion of space await him?

Ancient humans once turned towards the stars for their answers. He returned his gaze to the window but could only see the reflection of his yellow eyes staring back in the window.

The silence was abruptly broken by a communications hail.

"Data, the captain has called an emergency meeting of the senior officers," notified Geordi LaForge. "He's received orders on a secured channel from Starfleet. I don't know what's going on, but after a quick stop at the Noborious system, the captain has ordered a course that brings us right along the border of the Neutral Zone. I don't know if this has anything to do with all those rumors about the Romulans, but I can't help to wonder."

"Understood, Geordi. I am on my way," answered Data before leaving the shadows of the darkened Ten-Forward.

CHAPTER THREE

When Will Riker's shift ended, he retreated to the sanctity of his quarters pondering the significance of Picard's unexpected communication from Starfleet. Then came the news that the rendezvous with the *Merrimac* was scrapped and superseded by an order that would soon take the *Enterprise* on a direct course to the edge of the Neutral Zone.

His mood quickly slipped to one of genuine concern.

For several months, the rumors of the Romulan military uprising and the threat of war upon the Federation were topics of casual debate over drinks in Ten-Forward. But under the glaring realization of the ship's revised heading, the reality of a Romulan confrontation seemed all but certain.

Picard hailed his officers to join him in the conference room. Riker left his quarters and headed towards the turbolift. The door to his room closed with a whisper and he walked the hall with his usual assured stride. It was the night shift, and the hallway was virtually empty, save for a young ensign who seemed unsure if he should make eye contact with the ship's First Officer. Riker acknowledged the young man with a confident smile and a nod. Maybe the gesture was reassuring for both of them.

He entered the turbolift and paused. Whatever the nature of their new mission, he was only minutes away from learning it – and he would confront his fate with the same trademark bravery that he demonstrated throughout his career. He straightened his shirt and as if trying to reinforce his resolve.

The turbolift doors closed and within moments he was whisked to Deck One. He took a deep breath before the elevator slowed and came to a halt. As he entered the lounge, the doors closed behind him with an electronic hush that filled the room with a somber stillness.

The captain and several of the senior staff were present. Riker did a quick headcount – only Worf and Data were missing. He walked towards the table and took his place next to Picard.

He gazed out the window and admired the view that the Observation Lounge afforded. A steady stream of stars streaked by as the

Enterprise maintained its stationary position within its bubble of warped space – carrying the ship and its crew to an uncertain outcome. Calm before the storm.

Across from Will, Dr. Crusher and Deanna Troi were casually discussing behavioral studies of deep space assignments. If only Deanna hadn't changed her mind over attending that conference on Starbase 127...

To Riker's right, Geordi uncomfortably shifted in his chair. The younger man was uncharacteristically pensive. Although LaForge believed that his thoughts remained hidden behind his VISOR, Will knew otherwise. It was an added benefit yielded from the countless late night poker games.

Picard gazed into the reflective sheen of the conference table, avoiding all eye contact with his staff. His face was expressionless, but his eyes rhythmically shifted as if he was engaged in a silent debate. Riker was momentarily reminded of Data as the android inwardly processed streams of digitized information.

The captain's expression provided no hint of the content of Peldin's orders. But Will did detect something lurking behind Picard's oblique expression. There was no mistaking it. Picard was intrigued.

The door opened and Worf entered and immediately took his seat to Picard's left and across from Riker, maximizing his ability to physically secure the safety of the two executive officers.

Picard finally raised his thoughtful gaze from the table and performed a quick inventory. "Where is Commander Data?"

"He's on his way," assured Geordi.

After another electronic sigh, the door yielded to Data. The android selected the shortest path to the vacant chair and sat down. Geordi greeted him with a nod which Data stiffly reciprocated.

Picard leaned forward and neatly interlocked his fingers. In an instant he met the individual gaze of each of his staff, an ability that always intrigued Riker and only confirmed his suspicions that the news would be unsettling.

"The Federation science ship *Leviathan* has been destroyed and all hands apparently lost. The cause of the ship's destruction has not yet been determined. Several scientific parties were on assignment upon the planet's surface. Their status is presently unknown."

Beverly put her hand to her mouth as Deanna shook her head and lowered her eyes. Even the usually stolid Worf scowled at the news. There was little honor in dying during an unprovoked attack.

“The *Leviathan*’s most recent assignment was the planet Wendor, within the Khuln system bordering the Neutral Zone,” observed Data.

“Wendor?” asked Riker. “I thought that the Wendorians perished millennia ago.”

“Yes, Number One,” said Picard as he leaned his chin into the cradle between his thumb and index finger. “However, the Wendorian home world was accidentally discovered about six months ago. The Federation augmented the surveillance network around the perimeter of the Neutral Zone, in response to increasingly unsettling intelligence that’s been gained about the Romulans.”

Riker and LaForge shared a confirming nod.

“During a routine test, it detected massive traces of the synthetic compound akreon within the atmosphere of Khuln IV. Since none of the planets in the Khuln system were known to support intelligent life, the presence of a synthesized substance presented a mystery. Fearing a Romulan explanation to this apparent anomaly, the *Hood* was sent to explore the origins of the readings. After a peripheral scan of the planet and subsequent away team, the *Hood* reported the remains of vast cities belonging to a technologically advanced race. Starfleet authorized an allied scientific venture, including a team from the Federation Archaeology Council. The *Leviathan*, an old space freighter, was recommissioned and quickly refitted for the expedition, captained by Carden Sydell.”

“Sydell?” scoffed Riker. “I didn’t know that he was released from care, let alone reinstated as a Starfleet officer. I can’t believe that he would be allowed the captain’s chair of a Federation ship.”

“Sydell was once well connected with Starfleet’s upper echelon,” Picard reminded. “Many viewed him as another tragedy of the Cardassian War and took sympathy for his misfortune. He was once considered one of the finest officers in Starfleet’s history, almost a legend.”

Will shook his head with objection, but Picard continued. “With the assistance of Dr. Thanin Creet, it was confirmed that Khuln IV was the elusive home world of the Wendorians. Many artifacts were returned aboard the *Hood*, bearing an unmistakable similarity to the numerous

pieces that Creet had uncovered throughout the quadrant. Preliminary scans confirmed a highly advanced society with technology surpassing our own.”

LaForge’s brow curled underneath his VISOR. “Who or what are the Wendorians?” he asked.

Picard gently tugged upon either side of his uniform as he prepared to respond, but Data intercepted. “The Wendorians were one of the premiere civilizations of the galaxy over four thousand years ago. There has been considerable evidence that suggests that the Wendorians explored many regions of the galaxy, possibly in search of other forms of intelligent life. Since most of the species that they encountered were significantly less advanced, Dr. Creet has suggested that the Wendorians assumed the roles of teachers and guardians. While this is in direct contradiction to our own Prime Directive, it would explain many of the accelerated advancements achieved by several species during that time. Approximately two thousand years ago, all traces of the Wendorians abruptly vanished from history. There is no evidence currently available that would confirm the cause of their abrupt disappearance.

“Captain, what does Starfleet believe happened to the *Leviathan*?” asked Will.

“Several explanations have been offered. For the moment it is believed that the akreon may have compromised the ship’s reactor core. The compound is known to disrupt every kind of mechanical equipment exposed to it – causing unpredictable and often destructive results.”

“I recall reading about akreon in conjunction with some promising developments in high-resolution neural mapping about three years ago,” noted Crusher. “At the time, it was hailed as the new breakthrough in medical engineering. But after only six months, there was no longer any mention of it in any medical journal. What exactly does it do?”

“It’s a signal regenerator,” explained LaForge. “A molecular compound that acts as a booster for sequenced energy emissions. Until now, it was believed that the Bordenins were the first to synthesize it around five years ago. It was initially developed to try to resolve many of the communication limitations faced during deep space assignments. After some very promising initial results, the testing was augmented to

include a variety of other applications. Everything from defense systems to medical instrumentation was considered.”

“From what I’ve heard of the tests, akreon caused repeated equipment failure,” said Riker. “Instead of amplifying an energy signal, it corrupted it.”

Geordi nodded. “Well, that’s true, which is why after five years it is still in the development phase. It’s a highly volatile substance. Once the akreon begins to decay it randomly resequences an energy matrix eventually resulting in a total system failure.”

“Then a Romulan explanation is not being considered at this time?” asked Worf.

“Lieutenant, I believe that is precisely Starfleet’s chief consideration,” replied the captain. “The fact that the Federation flagship has been ordered to determine the *Leviathan*’s fate, when there are other Federation vessels within closer proximity to the Khuln System, only underscores Starfleet’s true concern. No one wants to openly suggest that the Romulans had something to do with this until more is learned.”

Riker saw his quarry present itself. “Captain, there has been a lot of rumors about what’s been happening upon Romulus. To be honest, if only half of it is true it’s very unsettling.”

“Indeed,” understated Picard without looking up from the table. With an indecisive pause, he debated with his reflection before rising from his chair and taking several determined paces away from the group. “What I am about to disclose to you is under the strictest confidence. Any breach may seriously compromise this mission.”

Picard’s senior staff exchanged a silent acknowledgment with each other, long enough to reveal to the captain that the rumors about the Romulans were more widespread than he allowed himself to believe.

“There is good reason to be concerned about the Romulans,” he said with a hushed voice that didn’t diminish in its authority. “Over the last year and a half, the Romulan Senate has been rocked by political scandal and economic unrest. The Romulan people have become unified under the leadership of a young politician, Senator Thorin. Thorin is a brutal militant who has won much favor by exposing and publicly executing the corrupt members of the Senate. Because of his immense popularity, the Senate has had little choice but to comply with his demands. Thorin has clearly voiced his opinion that a war with the

Federation would cure his planet's economic troubles and serve to redistribute the wealth of the quadrant in Romulus's favor. He has dedicated himself to flushing out and imprisoning anyone accused of being a Federation sympathizer, including those suspected of seeking reunification with the Vulcans. The Federation considers this man to be the biggest threat to the Romulan/Federation neutrality."

A hush fell over the room. This was ill news and only crystallized the grimness of their current mission. Certainly, there had been countless skirmishes with the Romulans in the recent past, but if they had become unified under a strong leader who openly called for war with the Federation...

Picard quietly returned to his chair, allowing his officers to recover from the impact of the disclosure.

"Captain, will the Romulans be engaged if they are discovered in Federation space?" asked Worf.

Picard reclined back into his chair, momentarily bringing his clasped hands to his lips. "Let's hope that it doesn't come to that, Lieutenant," he cautioned with deliberate care.

LaForge looked up from the table. Perhaps the crew of the *Leviathan* were only the beginning of the fatalities. "Captain, what does our current heading to the Noborious system have to do with the mission to Wendor? It must be important if Starfleet is willing to delay our arrival to the Neutral Zone."

"We are to rendezvous with Dr. Creet on Sindar. He theorized that after the Wendorian home world was unexpectedly destroyed, many of their emissaries traveling to other planets were suddenly left without a home. He believes that these Wendorian scouts landed on planets throughout the galaxy and colonized them.

"Around five years ago, he discovered what he believes to be the direct descendants of one of these colonies. He has lived among them since their discovery. Creet disclosed the fate of the *Leviathan* to their leaders, and he believes that they possess some knowledge of the ship's fate. Admiral Peldin believes that it's ancient mysticism and nothing more, but worthy of an investigation. I suspect that Starfleet is eager to identify a non-Romulan origin to the *Leviathan*'s destruction."

Picard gazed across the table inviting further questions, but there was only silence. "We should be reaching Sindar in the morning. I will

be leading the away team. Counselor Troi and Commander Data, I'll be requiring both of your services. Will, you'll have the bridge. As for the rest, prepare your posts for all contingencies. Especially you, Beverly."

Dr. Crusher returned a faint, but reassuring smile.

"Dismissed," Picard concluded with a nod.

One by one, the officers absently departed from the conference table in silence. For months they had casually shared the rumors and the conjectures. But now, with their fears confirmed – they resigned themselves to their individual duties. There were no words, no eye contact as they headed towards the turbolift in complete silence.

Picard remained seated, staring into the opaque surface of the table which seemed to only present more unanswered questions. "Data," beckoned Picard without raising his attention to the exiting figures. The android came to an abrupt halt before turning. "Yes, Captain?"

"Data, please remain for a moment. I wish to discuss a matter with you," Picard informed as he invited Data to return to the table and take a seat. He offered the android an awkward smile and confirmed that the rest had left the room before continuing. "It has come to my attention that you seem to have become, well, rather preoccupied lately."

Data only offered his full attention, seemingly oblivious to the prompt. Picard sighed before regrouping with a more direct strategy. "Is there something that you would like to discuss. Something of a personal nature?"

"Captain, I believe you are referring to my recent analysis of the crew's varying beliefs regarding the existence of a divine consciousness."

"Yes, Data," confirmed Picard, eagerly relieved.

The android stirred in his chair. "Has my analysis offended anyone, Sir?"

"No Data, that's not it at all," assured Picard. "I thought perhaps that I might be able to provide some guidance."

"Yes, Captain," awaited Data.

"When I was first apprised of your recent inquiries, I found it rather curious. The question of a divine intelligence has never seemed to interest you."

"Captain, since the passing of my creator, Dr. Soong, and the deactivation of my brother Lore, it has become increasingly important for me to understand the limitations of my own existence," responded the

android. “Dr. Soong’s passing created a need for me to learn what occurs after one is dead. I hope that by better understanding various theological beliefs, I will be able to address questions that I have regarding myself.”

“I see,” Picard nodded. “What is it that you hope to learn?”

“If I have a soul, Captain.”

Picard decisively paused as the undertow of Data’s simple statement enveloped him. He had underestimated the android’s dilemma, believing it to be nothing more than a pastime. But now it was evident that Data was seeking to understand something greater than Picard could hope to answer. “Data, none of us can determine with certainty if we have a soul. It is a matter of belief.”

“But I do not yet understand what those beliefs are,” replied Data. “It appears paradoxical that such strong conviction would be allocated to something with so little empirical evidence to support it.”

“And you have been collecting data from the crew in order to add to your study?”

“Yes Captain,” Data confirmed. I have been using the ship’s libraries to catalog and cross-reference all known forms of religious beliefs that are or have been practiced throughout recorded history,” the Commander explained. “At present, I have identified ten thousand, seven hundred and forty-eight distinct forms of religious ideologies. To obtain a more personal perspective, I have been collecting individual samples from the crew.”

“What do you hope to accomplish with your findings?” asked Picard.

“I wish to learn if a god exists and if I can communicate with it.”

Picard’s eyes quickly turned towards the table, intentionally concealing his thoughts from the android. He sensed a flush of amusement at the naiveté of Data’s whim, but he also knew that the android was not prone to careless statements. “Data, how do you propose to accomplish this?”

“I have been devising a program in one of the holodecks,” Data continued. “It is based upon a quantitative approach devised by J’hona Calahorn, a Betazoid artist. He recently generated a single humanoid face, representing a composite of all the intelligent life forms belonging to the Federation. J’hona digitally sampled individual images and applied an algorithm to weigh them by population size in order to create a single

composite. The result was very intriguing. By applying J'hona's methodology as a basis, I have taken each of the ten thousand, seven hundred and forty-eight forms of theological persuasions and have weighted them by additional factors, such as the age of the respective civilization and relative advancement based upon the Adoloian scale."

"I see," Picard responded. "Data, have you fully explored the ramifications of this venture? You are a machine, using a machine to artificially recreate a divine entity. Some might consider this plan to be ill-conceived at best."

"I understand your concern, Captain," offered Data. "However, I believe that my methodology is representative of most other life forms. Many species endow their own physical characteristics upon their respective deity. I have theorized that this is true to make the deity more identifiable and meaningful. In my experiment, I am doing nothing less by using the holodeck, a machine, to make a divine entity more meaningful to me."

Picard rose from his seat and gazed out of the window behind him. "You were created in the image of humankind and now you're completing the circle."

"Captain, do you object to my experiment? I will discontinue it at once."

"No, Data," assured Picard. "I don't make it a practice of dissuading members of my crew from their theological pursuits. However, I am still not convinced that your methodology is your best alternative."

"Captain, the underlying principles of my experiment are indicative of the concepts outlined by the Hegelian Dialectic, a process first advanced over five hundred years ago upon Earth. The dialectic proposes that the realization of an idea occurs through a three-stage process. The first stage is thesis, a proposition advanced and maintained solely by argument; antithesis, the second stage, is the fulfilling of the proposition through the juxtaposition of its opposite; and the third stage is..."

"Synthesis," whispered Picard to the cosmic sea that filled his periphery. "Yes Data, I understand your reasoning. You bring a new meaning to the term – *'Deus ex machina'*."

Data responded with a blank expression as his cognizance yielded to one of the millions of programming subroutines that composed his artificial intelligence. “Accessing...,” he paused. “ ‘*Deus ex machina*’, an archaic Latin idiom that means ‘God from the machine’. It is used to describe the dramatic device employed by many of the plays of ancient Greece that relied upon divine intervention to resolve otherwise irreconcilable circumstances. An actor assuming a role of a divine being would be lowered from a mechanical apparatus at the end of the play and provide a solution that would otherwise not be achieved through mortal means,” Data returned his attention to the captain. “I believe your reference suggests a more literal interpretation of the term.”

Picard nodded. “I suspect that you will find our encounter with the Sindarians enlightening. I understand that they are a very spiritual culture.”

Data’s eyes became bright. “I am looking forward to it, Captain. Other than a few log entries by Dr. Creet, there is no reference of them in the ship’s libraries.”

“No, I don’t believe there would be,” agreed Picard. “Dismissed, Commander.”

Data rose from his chair and exited through the door to the turbolift.

Picard studied the departing figure with a mixture of curiosity and reluctance. Although Data’s experiment was in of itself harmless, Picard couldn’t ward off the peculiar feeling that rippled across his essence like a stone cast into a dark pool. He wondered if Guinan was right. Perhaps Data had become disenfranchised with studying humans. Maybe the Romulan threat, or incidents like the *Leviathan*, had filled the android with a sense that humans were merely helpless flotsam upon the ebb tide of existence.

CHAPTER FOUR

The young engineer behind the transporter console was visibly tense as Worf paced before him. Deanna Troi did her best to conceal her amusement as the Klingon's imposing shadow repeatedly eclipsed the young man's ashen face.

The door to the transporter room yielded with a hush as Picard and Data entered. As Dr. Creet had advised, the away team abandoned their Starfleet uniforms in favor of civilian clothes more suitable for the terrain – along with a backpack for overnight essentials.

Worf immediately approached Picard as Data positioned himself over a transporter pad.

“Captain, as Chief Security Officer, I urge you to reconsider beaming down to the planet without a weapon,” implored Worf.

“Dr. Creet's instructions were very clear,” soothed Picard. “The Sindarians are very wary of Federation politics. Any show of force would be misinterpreted as an act of aggression.”

“We have little understanding of their customs and laws,” reminded Worf. “Even without any intentional transgression, you may inadvertently end up under their custody. Besides, we have no assurance that this isn't a trap. If you will not protect yourself, at least let me accompany you.”

“Your objection is noted, but I cannot let you beam down with us, Lieutenant. From what we've been able to scan, the Sindarians are a very simple race. I can't predict how they will react at the sight of a Klingon,” explained Picard. “Especially one so formidable,” he added, noting the pale engineer. “Dr. Creet has given me his assurance that he will personally guarantee our safety.”

Worf remained reticent but continued to fume behind downcast eyes. Realizing that this was as much victory as he could hope to gain over the Klingon, Picard turned and took his place on the transporter platform between Troi and Data. He nodded his readiness to the young engineer. The skittish officer turned to Worf who grudgingly conceded with a nod.

Picard watched as the defeated Klingon began to sparkle with luminescence as the sound of the transporter began to reach a crescendo.

The entire transporter room quickly dissolved into a radiant blur as the echo of an artificial whirlpool overtook him. As the pulse of the vortex began to subside, Picard found himself staring into the maw of an ancient cave.

The air suddenly seemed thin, but it was the warmth of the cavern that caught Picard off guard. It seemed like a lifetime since his last shoreleave, and he was unprepared for the ambush of sensations that flooded him when suddenly exposed to a non-climate-controlled environment.

A once familiar figure stood before the away team. The face was older than Picard remembered, but the eyes were still bright.

“Dr. Creet, it’s good to see you again,” greeted Picard.

The old man advanced and put a firm arm around the captain. “Jean-Luc. The years have been kinder to you,” replied Creet with a playful rub to Picard’s scalp. “Well, almost.”

Picard shot a warning to Troi who vowed her eternal silence with a smile.

“Let me look at you, Picard.” The old man grabbed the captain’s shoulders and held him at arm’s length. “A starship captain. Now why would you go and do something like that? You showed some real promise as a scientist,” noted Creet with a hint of sincere regret. “I must admit, I didn’t remember you when Peldin first told me you were coming. Then I recalled the young cadet who cornered me after a three-hour lecture and began to expound upon his theories of the Mylorn Dynasty of ancient Turanis.”

“I remember,” corroborated Picard. “Speaking of Admiral Peldin, he asked me to make sure that you had enough supplies to hold you until your next rendezvous with the *Equestrian*.”

The old man paused with a puzzled look. “That’s curious. Peldin knows that the *Equestrian* was here just last week. It’s funny, but when I first came to this planet, Peldin sent the *Equestrian* only once a season to check up on me. Since Wendor’s discovery, they’re here almost every other week. He’s either renewed his interest in my welfare, or he needs the copies of my handwritten journals to help him fall asleep.” The doctor punctuated with a laugh.

“Let me introduce you to my staff,” offered Picard. “This is Counselor Deanna Troi, and Lieutenant Commander Data.”

“The android!” exclaimed Creet. He studied Data with intense scrutiny. The Sindarians will be very interested in you, my friend.”

“I am curious to learn about them also,” responded Data. “I have reviewed your logs since you joined the Sindarians over three years ago. By all accounts, they are a highly spiritual society. I am eager to learn more about their theology. Your logs went into considerable detail about their core beliefs – the relationship of opposing values of the same ideal. A duality of truth, as you refer to it.”

“They are very religious, almost as much as they are wary of strangers. That’s why I had you beam down near this cave, instead of their camp. In their eyes, it would have been seen as an invasion.”

“Is there anything more that we should know about them? Any special customs that we should be mindful to observe?” asked Troi.

“They are a very private society, bordering on xenophobic,” explained the doctor. “Don’t let their simplicity fool you, you’ll find them surprisingly evolved and articulate. You should know that they possess little love for the Federation, but I’m sure they’ll find an opportunity to tell you themselves,” he concluded with a wry smile.

“Doctor, I was surprised to learn that you were not a member of the Wendorian expedition,” Picard noted. “I understand that you chose to remain here, even after Wendor’s discovery was confirmed. Frankly, I would have expected you to take advantage of the first opportunity to explore the Wendorian home world. In hindsight, you were obviously very fortunate.”

“Yes. It is odd, isn’t it?” the doctor casually stroked his chin in reflection. “I must admit that these days I feel more like a xenologist instead of an archeologist. My pursuit of the Wendorians has blurred the boundaries of my career. I have a rare opportunity here, one that any archeologist would dream of. I can live among the people whom I have devoted my life to learning about, instead of among fossils. This alternative is far more appealing, especially at my age. Besides, the teams aboard the *Leviathan* were running tests for me and collecting all the data that I required. It’s a shame what happened to them, a shame.”

The old man continued to shake his head with regret and turned to leave the cave. As Data hastened to follow, Picard discreetly turned to Deanna. “Counselor,” he whispered. “Do you detect anything unusual in his behavior?”

“I do detect that he’s acting apprehensively,” she replied while squinting her eyes to shift focus to her emphatic perceptions. “He is withholding something, but I’m not sure if it’s by choice.”

“Are you suggesting that the Sindarians might be exerting some kind of influence?” Picard dubiously asked. “That hardly seems possible. The scans suggest an almost primitive culture here.”

“I’m not sure, Captain. But I can tell you that his loyalties are no longer clearly aligned with the Federation,” Troi confirmed. “As for the Sindarians... I detect something very powerful. Calm, but powerful. I don’t know if it’s them, or something else nearby.”

Outside the cave, the away team was greeted by the sweeping vistas afforded by their elevated position in the Evacca Mountains. A warm sun beamed its radiance overhead as they gradually descended into a shallow valley. To the east, placid savannas supported the weight of the rich azure sky. Their vantage point was not without its price; the air was thin and even their downhill pace found them soon gasping for oxygen.

As they approached the village, the larger huts and a dozen or so stone buildings became visible. The large pastures were demarcated by crude fences that herded the livestock, whose smell preceded their appearance. There were two types of beasts – large bovine creatures, and smaller nimble animals who hopped over each other in some kind of defense strategy. The larger animals occasionally roared while the smaller ones constantly mewed. To Deanna, they sounded like the cries of a human child.

The trail continued to lead into a hollow, where the true size of the encampment became apparent. There must have been over two thousand tents that filled the shallow valley, Picard estimated. The tents, which Dr. Creet referred to as peetsus, were constructed of thick heavily woven fabric, tautly wrapped around wooden poles. They were rectangular shaped with a conical top.

The peetsus were arranged in a grid, creating paths that were wide enough to accommodate several people at once. These avenues were filled with pedestrians, kiosks and impromptu meeting spots.

The smell of leaves and campfires filled the air. Picard was momentarily transported back to his childhood in *La Barre* and its golden autumns.

Picard remained quiet, almost pensive during the hike. While he had sifted through Creet's logs of the Sindarians, he couldn't help but to feel a bit disappointed to see them in person.

The Wendorians were arguably the preeminent race of their time. The Sindarians, however, were a far cry from their ancestral glory. Their lives were void of any technology and were supported only by means that most in the Federation would describe as primitive. Picard had hoped to have glimpsed some hidden technological treasure among the village. They barely had running water.

Dr. Creet paused and turned towards the trailing members of the away team. Only Data had retained a comfortable stride alongside the doctor, the adverse altitude having little effect upon his biomechanics. Creet politely allowed the others to catch up before beginning his dissertation.

"The Sindarians have remained virtually unchanged over the centuries. In all, there are sixteen distinct nations that peacefully coexist upon this planet. This nation, or *didain*, are known as the Kulu Sha and have had to endure the heat of the Dracane desert. We only arrived at this camp three weeks ago, to mark the coming of the autumnal equinox."

Creet freely walked past the perimeter of the village, and the away team followed his example. It was then that Picard was able to get his best look at the villagers. The Sindarians were tall, typically exceeding two meters. They were virtually identical to humans in appearance.

Their skin was bronze, almost golden. They were unanimously raven haired – with no indication of baldness. He realized how peculiar his appearance must seem. But what immediately intrigued Picard was the stellar glow of their emerald eyes and how the intensity adjusted to their ambient light.

As they wandered through the village, the inhabitants scrutinized the strangers with their intense gazes. Troi felt her mind being probed by the seemingly benign passersby. Even Picard, without possessing Troi's sensitivities, could tell that they were regarded as invaders.

While casually studying the village, Troi found herself perplexed. She felt something powerful, almost beyond her perception. All around her were the casual displays of a simple race; a race that still corralled animals for subsistence, existed without machines, and had only adopted

basic irrigation techniques to supply running water. Surely, these people could not possess the quiet but immense power that she sensed.

Whatever it was, she could only compare it to an ocean. On the surface, it remained tranquil, but it possessed an immeasurable depth and could turn destructive without warning.

Creet paused in front of one of the few permanent structures – a cruciform shaped stone building. There were several similar constructions among the village, but this was the largest that Picard had observed – able to hold one hundred or more.

The building was composed of large stone slabs, with small, carefully placed rocks perfectly filling the gaps. The roof was constructed of various pyramid-shaped structures made of hundreds of uniformly sized bricks. Picard tried to guess how old the building was – it could have been erected centuries ago. Maybe longer.

“Before you can be formally allowed entrance into this village, you must be received by the V’Dir. Be wary Jean-Luc, she can be a challenging individual.” Picard acknowledged with a nod.

The interior was noticeably cooler, a benefit of its stone construction. There was a hint of dampness in the air, although no visible condensation. What stood out to Picard was the absence of any art or adornment.

At the crux of the cruciform, an old woman sat in a large stone throne that was engraved with strange hieroglyphics. Her palms were casually clasped together, resting upon her lap.

The woman was dressed in flowing violet robes that stretched out behind her, her face framed by thick silver hair. Directly above hung the only exception to the room’s austerity. A peculiar symbol of unknown material – two complementary opposite waves. One wave was black, and the other was white – together forming a circle. What was it that Data said earlier? Duality of Truth?

In the recesses of either corner, two adolescent girls sat on the floor in perfect stillness. The Sindarian equivalent of acolytes, Picard guessed.

It was clear that the old woman was awaiting their arrival, not even pretending to divide her attention among other competing concerns. Picard concluded that she either lacked the savvy of other leaders or couldn’t afford their vanity.

With a single cue of her hand, Creet stopped them in the hall and approached the V'Dir. "V'Dir Tamarisha, our guests have arrived."

The V'Dir remained impassive and unimpressed. She curtly nodded and Creet motioned them into the room.

Picard wondered if she was a political leader or a spiritual one. Maybe both.

Picard took a step forward. "V'Dir Tamarisha, I am Captain Jean-Luc Picard. The Federation brings greetings and gratitude for allowing our delegation admittance into your village. Dr. Creet has told me that your people have only been here for a few weeks. I congratulate your leadership with the speed that they were able to set up camp."

"Spare me your pale attempts at diplomacy, Picard. The only thing that the Federation brings is chaos," the woman warned. "If the Federation wasn't in need of our exploitation, you and I would not be meeting."

So much for diplomacy. Picard stood silently before the V'Dir and attempted to regroup. This woman had more resolve than he had led himself to believe. "V'Dir, I can assure you that the Federation has no wish to exploit your society, or any other."

The elder woman scoffed behind a dark smile. "Picard, you are a fool either for your ignorance or for being blinded by your own imperialism. You claim that your Federation has no desire to exploit. Perhaps then you wouldn't mind imparting your interpretation of the recent incident at A'kellian IV?"

Picard was caught off guard – he could sense a trap but lacked the foresight to avoid it. "The A'kellians became victims of a horrific plague that threatened to decimate their entire species. No cure for the contamination could be discovered. Although they did not belong to the Federation, Starfleet was charged with transporting the entire A'kellian population to Pakareen, which they now consider their home."

"And what was the fate of A'kellian IV?" the V'Dir asked.

"Well, after it was determined that humanoids were immune to the illness, the Federation utilized the planet as a training facility for Starfleet. With the full permission of the A'kellians, I would add."

"And don't you find it curious that a disease that is harmless to virtually every race within the Federation, mysteriously attacks an alien world?" she posed. "A world that just happens to offer a unique strategic

position by its proximity to the Cardassian Empire? A world that is now within sole control of Starfleet? Or do you honestly believe that it was all a fortuitous coincidence?"

Picard could hear the snap of the trap being sprung as he realized his mistake. He allowed himself to underestimate the Sindarians, presuming too much from their primitive lifestyle. The V'Dir was a matriarch of a race descended from the Wendorians, a race that exceeded the technological advancements of even the Federation. A race that claimed mastery over the quadrant for thousands of generations while Picard's progenitors were still tribal hunters in Earth's savage prehistory.

A cloud blurred the sun and as the shadows within the room grew, the V'Dir's green eyes glowed in diametric opposition.

"V'Dir, however you choose to selectively view history is a luxury of your freedom," rebuked Picard. "The Federation has dedicated itself to the preservation of that freedom, and countless lives have been sacrificed to fortify that position. As inviting as the opportunity to debate Federation policy with you is, I'm afraid that I am under a strict agenda. If you do not wish our presence here, we will leave your company at once. I was under the dubious impression that we were invited and would be treated as guests."

The V'Dir leaned back into her chair. If she felt a sense of victory over the captain, it wasn't discernible. After a long pause, she sighed. "Captain, once again, I have chosen the wrong person to fight my battles with. You are correct, you are our guests. We have little to offer you and your company, but please welcome yourself to it. Tonight, we will celebrate the equinox. I hope that I can persuade the three of you to join us and spend the night in our camp."

Picard renewed his smile. "Of course, V'Dir. We would be honored."

Tamarisha rose from her station and prepared to dismiss the company with a short bow. She abruptly paused and brought her index finger to her lips. "One more question, Captain," she stated casually. Her movements seemed unrehearsed, but Picard could tell that this wasn't the serendipitous afterthought that she hoped to pretend it was.

"Did the scientific teams upon Wendor scan any unusual readings emanating from the two moons, Terros and Foemos?"

Again, Picard felt at a disadvantage. There seemed to be a hidden purpose behind this question too, but he failed to grasp its intent. “I’m not aware of any analysis performed on the moons. All readings were confined to the planet.”

The V’Dir closed her eyes in quiet disappointment. She raised her gaze again and targeted Picard with shimmering green eyes. “Your kind is zealous in its pursuit of knowledge of physical things. But your impetuosity denies you the revelations found only upon the path of Being that lays before you.”

Was it another insult – or a warning? Picard couldn’t decide.

She held his gaze for a moment longer until Dr. Creet ushered them from the building. As they left, he heard the V’Dir pace the length of the long room, her robes whispering secrets behind her.

The late afternoon sun seemed warmer in contrast to the cool breeze that crept into the Evacca mountains. The night would be cold, predicted Picard as the atmosphere would prove too arid to maintain the day’s heat. He made a point to check in with Riker and to pass along his reassurances of his safety to Worf.

Data remained quiet most of the afternoon. It seemed that his earlier enthusiasm had been replaced by quiet reflection. Picard admitted to himself that the encounter with the Sindarians would require a thorough reexamination.

As the sun set, early stars began to beam amid the canvas of the darkening sky. Despite decades of interplanetary travel, Picard always found gazing at the stars from a terrestrial perspective a refreshing alternative.

They lingered in Creet’s peetsu while the doctor prepared an evening meal. The peetsu was warmed by a small pit of fire stones – indigenous black rocks mined from the caverns of the Evacca that retained a fire’s heat for hours. The peetsu was close quarters for the four of them, but comfortable.

They shared the evening meal that consisted of stew and bread. While it was rather bland, the meat was surprisingly sweet and tender. Troi ate little as she recalled the small animals with the child-like cries

that provided the meat. She missed the virtue of the food replicators aboard the *Enterprise*.

Throughout the meal, Creet remained quiet. Picard concluded that the old man was unaccustomed to visitors. Or maybe he too was reflecting upon the meeting with the V'Dir.

After the meal, Creet gathered the bowls and utensils and placed them into a bucket of water to soak. After gathering his walking stick and a small knapsack, the doctor led the away team from his peetsu.

Torches lined the grid of avenues and imparted some much-needed warmth as the air continued to cool. Above them shone a large full moon that seemed to share a secret with the night sky.

Picard was reminded of the V'Dir's question regarding Wendor's twin moons and wondered about their significance.

The evening was quiet save for the soft buzzing of insects. The roads were becoming increasingly populated as families were gathering for the evening's festivities. There were very few elderly. As Picard accurately concluded, the harsh life of the Kulu Sha exacted an expensive toll.

During this second tour of the village, the residents seemed to altogether ignore the members of the away team, as if the acceptance of the V'Dir shielded them from any further scrutiny. However, in the occasional darkened avenue where the light of the moon failed to shine, the soft green glow of their eyes could be seen monitoring the away team's passing.

Creet continued to lead them towards the center of the village as he detailed many of the Kulu Sha's customs. Like most of the other didains, they practiced several rituals relating to seasons and natural cycles.

They could hear the growing hum of voices from the crowd as they neared their destination. The center of the settlement was a large rectangular clearing, not far from the V'Dir's chamber. At its heart, a large bonfire blazed, dancing to the wind's melody. Behind the fire, several immense stone slabs were stacked to form a towering altar.

At least a thousand of the didain convened in the public square.

Picard listened to the voices of the Sindarians near him. While he couldn't understand their language, he was quite taken by how melodious

it sounded. Creet had mentioned that despite the separatism of the sixteen didains inhabiting the planet, they all spoke in the original Wendorian.

Despite the crowd's density, the Sidarians maintained a distance from the away team.

"They are able to detect me attempting to read their emotions," announced Troi to the captain. "They are successfully blocking me, with little effort."

Being able to hinder the empathic powers of a Betazoid was no small feat for any species. Picard detected the defeat in Troi's voice, the resignation of her surpassed abilities. Picard was even more convinced that the Sindarians were not the triviality that Peldin had so casually dismissed.

A young boy finally approached the group. He smiled broadly, his jade eyes gently dancing in the night sky. He immediately grabbed Deanna's hand. "I am Jusilian. The V'Dir has told my parents that you are visitors from another planet. Is this true?" his eyes sparkled with wonderment.

"Yes, it is," answered Troi while matching the boy's smile.

The boy raised his eyes to the night and squinted for a moment before pointing to a precise point in the sky. "Is that your ship?" Picard tried to follow the boy's guide before dubiously shaking his head.

"Yes, you are correct," confirmed Data. "Your optical abilities greatly exceed those of humans, Jusilian."

"Are you really a mechanical man?"

"I am an artificial being," clarified Data.

The young boy grinned with satisfaction. "May I show you to my friends?"

Data looked at the captain who nodded his consent. Maybe this was a sign that the ice was beginning to thaw.

As Picard watched the boy lead Data into the crowd, he suddenly felt an odd sensation from behind him. He closed his eyes for a moment and could feel an energy probing his thoughts.

He resisted the instinct to turn around, instead looking to Troi for validation. Oddly, the Counselor appeared to sense nothing out of the ordinary.

The enigma spoke. "May I offer you something to drink?"

Picard turned and met the gaze of a young Sindarian woman. She was about his height, with long raven hair that perfectly framed her green eyes. Her layers of lavender robes fluttered in the wind like a maritime flag of a conqueror's ship.

She carried a large tray near her waist that she presented to the group. Picard couldn't respond, unable to free himself from the intensity of the young woman's gaze.

"Thank you," accepted Troi as she reached towards one of the ceramic cups.

"Yes, thank you," distantly repeated Picard, almost mechanically. The woman offered a peculiar smile before turning away and disappearing into the crowd.

"Are you all right, Captain?" asked Troi.

"Yes, Counselor," assured Picard as the strange sensation dimmed to a dull tingle. He took a sip from the cup. The beverage was sweet and light, with a hint of fruit. Picard withdrew the cup and curiously examined the dark liquid.

"It's *frajelen*," said Creet. "It's a wine made from the *shulutsha* fruit that thrives in these mountains. The kegs that they prepared last year are first opened for this celebration. It has some bite, so drink it slowly," he warned. "I don't want to confess how many mornings I've spent regretting that I didn't heed my own advice," he chuckled.

The wind slackened as a murmur rose from the crowd. From atop the stone altar, V'Dir Tamarisha appeared and stood before the congregation, bearing a large ceremonial staff – her formal black robes billowing in the wind. Behind her, the full moon rose like a summoned seraph. Picard and Troi shifted back and forth, trying to gain a better view among the tall Sindarians.

"Kulu Sha!" she summoned the didain. "Feel the mighty wind of the Dalikor as she beats her regal wings to greet us. We are the wind, Kulu Sha. We are the wind that strokes the mountains. We are the wind that vigilantly patrols the land."

The crowd chanted their agreement.

Picard began to feel lightheaded as his face became flushed. The moment began to feel surreal, almost out-of-the-body. He glanced over at Troi and could tell she was experiencing similar sensations.

“Tonight, we will break tradition – a tradition that we have sacredly upheld for millennia. Tonight, I have allowed outsiders to join us on this holy day. And tonight, I will speak to you in their language, so they may know of the peril they will soon face.”

“Beware, Kulu Sha,” she warned. “For even as we rejoice in the harvest, the shadow of the *Huundhraeyl* has risen again and challenges the children of the Dalikor. The outsiders are proof of my words,” she pointed to the away team, filling Picard with an unexplained rush.

“They are the signs of omen and doom. The *Huundhraeyl* has unfolded its cloak to consume a new eon. The time of Reclamation is upon us,” she warned into the night sky.

Picard looked to the ground to steady himself. A feeling of vertigo gripped him. “It’s okay, Jean-Luc,” soothed Creet as he held his arm. “It is just the *frajelen*.”

There was sudden movement within the crowd. Picard regained his focus and could see a dozen or more Sindarian women, dressed in black robes similar to the V’Dir’s, each carrying a ceremonial torch.

One by one, they carefully placed their torches onto the bonfire – seemingly unaffected by the heat. When they were done, another woman – younger than the rest, approached the edge of the fire. Picard’s vision began to blur, but he was certain that the young woman was the same as the woman who served him the potent wine.

With both hands she slowly covered her head with her cowl and stepped into the fire without hesitation. Picard struggled to call out but couldn’t utter the words. He was too incapacitated to speak.

He watched hopelessly as the woman continued to walk directly into the flame until her silhouette was consumed by the inferno.

The pillar of fire rose to meet the challenge of the darkened sky. The blaze roared, delving deep into the stars, eclipsing the V’Dir. Picard instinctively shielded his face from the burning intensity before gazing one final time into the blaze.

It was either a trick of the fire or the influence of the *frajelen*, but for a moment Picard thought that he detected a faint movement within the fire – as if something stirred. Just before falling unconscious, he watched the fire immeasurably grow – unfurling across the night sky like a bird spreading its blazing wings.

CHAPTER FIVE

It wasn't one of the livestock that awoke Captain Picard from the middle of his sleep. The series of guttural snarls instead belonged to a wild animal prowling just beyond the encampment. He heard it again, a little more distant.

Picard raised himself upon his elbows and scanned the peetsu's interior. The light of the full moon projecting through the woven canvas of the tent provided enough visibility.

Data was still unaccounted for.

Troi was sleeping nearby, swaddled in blankets and furs. Picard unwrapped himself from his coverings and was surprised to find that the peetsu's interior was warmer than expected. The heat from the fire stones was waning, but it was enough to ward off the autumn chill.

The growls gradually grew more distant before being surpassed by the doctor's muted snore.

In Picard's entire career history, there was always a presumption of trust that he extended to all new species. It was this sense of tolerance that united the many fractioned worlds within the Federation. Despite all of this, Picard had to concede to the growing misgivings that he now held for the Sindarians. He even suspected that the appearance of the young boy who led Data away was nothing more than a ruse to separate them.

Picard drew the blankets closer as he tried to recall the last time he spent a night away from the *Enterprise*. Although his current situation lacked the luxury of his quarters, Picard felt strangely invigorated. The wild cold air was refreshing, and the growling of the feral beast only reminded him just how vulnerable he was. That realigned sense of humanity and the humbleness gained from it is what first drew him into Starfleet – being thrust into the heart of the cosmic ocean only inverted his sense of self.

Under the light of the full moon, the village around him slept in unison. The thought of over six thousand people sleeping at the same time filled him with a peculiar sense of wonderment. Aboard the *Enterprise*, the crew was divided into independent shifts. There were members of his crew whose lives would never intersect, living separately within the confines of their respective rotation. Among the Kulu Sha, the order of

their days was shared in communion, unifying the tribe with a sense of fellowship that even surpassed the sense of duty of his officers.

The lives of the Kulu Sha were marked by the passing of the sun and moon and the seasons of their world traveling around its star. Before drifting off into sleep, Picard realized that in a very profound sense, these devout people shared their lives amid the balance of light and darkness – life and death.

The dawn came early to the Evacca mountains, banishing the vestiges of magenta that filled the many crevices of the rock face. The calls of a variety of birds could be heard outside the peetsu.

Picard woke again, this time to the smell of brewing coffee. Creet was making the most of the remaining heat of the fire stones.

“Courtesy of Admiral Peldin and the *Equestrian*,” Creet announced raising his mug. Troi was also awake, rummaging through her backpack. Creet placed the pot along with three mugs upon a tray and headed towards the exit. “It’s a beautiful morning. Come join me when you are ready,” he said as he left the peetsu.

Picard followed Creet to the front of the shelter, observing the vapor rising from his breath. The doctor had arranged a table with a makeshift breakfast of fermented milk, bread and some assorted fruit. Creet offered Picard a mug of hot coffee which he eagerly accepted. It was a welcomed break from his traditional Earl Grey.

Picard blew some air to cool his coffee, “Should I be concerned that Data has not returned?” Picard asked, eyes peering above the mug.

Dr. Creet vigorously shook his head. “I can assure you that your Lieutenant Commander is fine and will be joining us shortly. The Sindarians are many things including intimidating, but they are not an aggressive race.”

Deanna exited the tent and helped herself to some fruit. The shulutsha berry bore enough similarity to the potent frajelen wine to make Troi wince with the memory of it.

“Doctor, I have no recollection of returning to your peetsu after the V’Dir spoke,” Troi stated.

“Nor do I,” Picard added. “What happened to us last night?”

“This year’s batch of frajelen is more potent than usual, and that is saying something” Creet smiled. “Being completely unaccustomed to its effects, I’m afraid you both fell under its spell, as it were. Two of the locals helped me bring you back to my quarters.”

“While the V’Dir was addressing the tribe, she mentioned something about a Reclamation. What did she mean by that?” asked Picard.

Creet hesitated. “It’s an ancient reference to... a...”. He paused, struggling with some internal conflict. His lips momentarily moved, but he made no sound. After a moment, his smile returned. “Actually, I do not know. I don’t recall ever hearing the term before.”

Picard shot an unsettled look to Troi, and she agreed with a nod. Something was off with the doctor. She sensed that he was being manipulated but her empathic senses could register nothing.

Her inability to use any of her Betazoid instincts to decipher the Sindarian’s intent frustrated her. The memory of her extra sensory empathy being easily overcome the previous night plagued her more than the aftereffects of the wine.

The deep and powerful ocean that she used to describe the didain had grown more absolute, along with her increasing sense of futility – that she was little more than discarded jetsam upon that ocean. She reluctantly admitted to herself that she was eager to part with the Sindarians and leave their planet.

“Admiral Peldin shared with me that you have recently revised your theories on what destroyed the Wendorian civilization,” Picard said while wiping the last of the fermented milk from his lips. “I’m eager to learn of your new findings.”

“It’s all an initial assessment” cautioned Creet. “It’s only a working theory. It’s difficult to unravel myth from truth from the Sindarians, as they are often perceived as one and the same. There are several ancient Sindarian texts – stories from the original Wendorian colony that landed here. They have only permitted me to analyze a few at a time and under their watch. Recently, while reviewing a particularly lengthy volume, I discovered a phrase that I was entirely unfamiliar with – *Trujulian F’Dar*. The term roughly translates to Hammer of God. At first, I believed that this lent credence to my initial theory that Wendor suffered a planetary-leveling event – an asteroid impact for instance. I

now hypothesize that the Wendorians were actually victims of an alien attack.”

“Wouldn’t that seem unlikely given how advanced they were?” asked Picard.

Creet agreed with a nod. “That’s what I first concluded but given the amount of akreon that both the *Hood* and *Equestrian* detected, I theorize that the attacking race was able to infiltrate Wendor’s capital and use their own technology against them, maybe by a less civilized race that had felt threatened by the Wendorian’s advanced technology. Conversely, there may have been another technologically advanced race that we know nothing about – a rival race that instigated a war with the Wendorians. That might also explain their rooted phobia of the outside world. Very few here will say much about it. In truth, I doubt that they really know what happened. It’s now so embedded in their ethos, that I doubt if we will ever know the facts.”

“Hammer of God,” repeated Picard. “The term would suggest that they view their destruction as an act of retribution.”

“We do not presume to interpret the fate that has befallen us,” dispelled a new voice behind him. “We dare no such arrogance.”

Picard turned and met the glowing gaze of the young woman who offered them the frajelen the previous night, her claret robes swirling around her as she became the eye of the storm. Behind her Data followed, his expression was as placid as ever.

“Data, where have you been?” asked Picard.

“I have spent the evening among the elders of the Kulu Sha,” he reported. “They had many questions.”

“I see,” confirmed Picard without releasing the woman from his suspecting gaze. “What did they wish to learn?”

“They wanted to know more about Starfleet, the weapons complement of the *Enterprise*, and your abilities as captain.”

Picard’s eyes grew dark as he turned to the woman. “I trust that the interrogation of my officer has proven profitable.”

The woman matched Picard’s scowl. “Do not presume, Captain, that you are in a position to pass judgment upon us. You arrived upon our planet accompanied by an empath who has continuously tried to invade our thoughts. And you condemn us? Your android was invited to meet

with us at his own volition. At least our methods of discovery are more transparent.”

“Captain, she is correct. I was not detained in any way.” Data agreed.

Picard’s suspicion only intensified. Data’s capacity to safeguard classified Starfleet intelligence was incorporated into his core memory programming. But the Sindarians were cunning. It was this cunning coupled with Data’s naivete that only galvanized Picard’s suspicions that the Sindarians had learned more than Data had intended.

“I would have been pleased to meet with your elders and tell them what they wished to know,” offered Picard in a calmer tone.

“Captain, that would not have proved an acceptable alternative,” replied the woman. “You are eager to learn the truth about us, as the presence of the empath validates. We are no different. However, you are a general of the Federation’s military machine. Your views and conduct are imbued by your position. Similarly, the empath by her very nature does not earn our trust. That leaves the android as the only avenue that we can pursue to learn the truth about your intent. You are here to ask for our assistance in learning what destroyed your science vessel. That knowledge is not without its price. Your authenticity and faithfulness to the Path of Being must be first confirmed.”

“And has it?”

“For the moment,” assured the woman.

“The urgency of my mission dictates my expediency. If your people truly have some assistance that they can offer, I must request it,” implored Picard.

The young woman held his gaze for a long moment as the emerald glow of her eyes intensified. Picard realized that his voice registered more urgency than he intended, and she realized that there was more to his mission than the destruction of a science ship.

The woman smiled. “Of course, Captain. But first, allow me to introduce myself – my name is Shalayus Mithyrial,” she said with a low nod. “I come to you as a servant of the V’Dir. The elders have agreed to impart two gifts to you – offerings to your Federation that will serve you on your mission. But the first gift requires a small journey.”

Picard hesitated. He was eager to return to the *Enterprise* but Peldin's order still echoed in his memory — “Accept whatever assistance they offer.”

Picard met the young woman's gaze. “Agreed,” he said.

The away team returned to Creet's peetsu and began to collect their belongings while assembling their backpacks.

“Data, did you learn anything from your meeting with the elders that would shed some light on what gifts the Sindarians intend to present?” asked Picard.

Data turned. “No, Captain. They made no mention of any gifts. They only shared stories of ancient Wendor and their spiritual beliefs. At times, they spoke among themselves in a language that I was unable to translate.”

“Captain, do you believe that the Sindarians are in possession of something that can provide any real value to our mission?” Troi asked.

Picard paused and shook his head. “I don't know. Admiral Peldin believes that despite their simplicity, they may still factor into the equation of the *Leviathan*'s fate. And we have already learned that despite their simplicity, they should not be casually dismissed.”

Before leaving the peetsu, they double-checked their belongings, and Picard shared a brief update with Riker. Picard was not the only one eager to continue with their mission.

Shalayus waited for them just outside the peetsu. Creet offered some dried meat and fruit for the journey, which they gratefully accepted. At the woman's urging, they refilled their canteens before heading out.

Shalayus led them upon a trail to the west – one that led away from the encampment and gradually ascended into the Evacca mountains. Sudden gusts of wind frequently whipped up along the sandy path forcing them to cover their eyes. Data closely maintained his stride behind the Sindarian, with Picard and Troi in tow.

Shalayus remained silent, offering no hint of their destination other than it being a very revered location. Picard couldn't fathom the association between a hallowed place in the mountains and the destruction of the *Leviathan*. He couldn't help but feel as if he was losing precious hours. He knew that the Romulans would be more capitalizing of their time.

Data's enthusiasm appeared renewed since his meeting with the didain's elders. When they returned to the *Enterprise*, Picard would have LaForge run a full diagnostic on Data, to ensure that nothing in the android's programming had been compromised.

Along the journey, they paused to eat the dried food that Creet had provided and sparingly drank some water. Troi was grateful for the pauses. The trail was not without its physical demands, and it was an unseasonably warm day.

Random birds of prey circled overhead, finding solace in the cathedral-like mountains. They patrolled the landscape looking for any of the small mammals that scurried across the rocky loam, or for the occasional wayward plains animal that failed the test of the Evacca.

The further their ascent, the thinner the air became. Only Data and Shalayus seemed immune to the increasing lack of oxygen. However, both Picard and Troi required an occasional break to regain their breath.

As their way wound farther west, the roar of a river intensified. Shalayus reluctantly agreed to the group's desire to rest. They gratefully refilled their canteens and rested underneath a lone tree that grew from one of the riverbanks. Troi quickly drank from her canteen, feeling especially dehydrated by the thinning air.

"Shalayus," asked Data. "During my meeting with the Elders, they often spoke in theological terms that I am unfamiliar with. I was hoping that you would elaborate upon them so that I may better understand their meaning."

Shalayus shifted position on the riverbank. "Very well," she consented. "At the core of our beliefs, there exist two elemental forces – J'Karr and J'Kree. Each is represented as a wing of the *Dalikor*."

"Who is the Dalikor?" asked Deanna.

A cloud passed overhead, momentarily darkening the sky. Shalayus's green eyes grew fractionally brighter. "The Dalikor is the great spirit that unified the forces of J'Karr and J'Kree. It rose like a great bird – forged from the fire from the center of their inherent contradiction."

"The legend of a great bird rising from the fire is a popular symbol among many cultures," observed Data. "Perhaps this is another example of the early influence of the Wendorians upon the galaxy."

Shalayus continued. “J’Karr is an amalgam of all the positive energy throughout the universe. “J’Kree is the nothingness that exists outside of J’Karr. Where there is strength, there is weakness – the absence of strength. Where there is light, there is darkness – the absences of light. Long ago, we believed that these qualities were trapped in inherent conflict. But it was the Dalikor that taught us that they are complements, that only when together do they possess meaning. Only when J’Karr and J’Kree are in harmony does life evolve. It is the dynamics created by their opposition – this revolution – that is the agent of life’s progression.”

“A duality of truth,” recalled Data.

Picard seemed less impressed. “Shalayus, last night the V’Dir used the term ‘Reclamation’. What did she mean by it?” He hoped to get a better response than Dr. Creet provided.

Shalayus paused a moment before responding. “The V’Dir refers to a conflicted state of Being, one where J’Karr and J’Kree need to re-achieve a balance.” Picard nodded, not with understanding but rather with acknowledgment of Shalayus’s deliberate vagueness.

“We saw you step into the fire last night during the ceremony,” Troi stated.

Shalayus nodded. “Many religions use water as the agent of purification and renewal. For my people – it is fire. Our robes protect us from the heat and the flames.

“What do your people believe happened to the *Leviathan*?” asked Picard.

She met his gaze. “It was consumed by the Huundhraeyl, an entity that has challenged my people across the eons of time,” she whispered to the sky that embraced her with a warm breeze. A shadow momentarily trespassed across her face as a bird of prey loomed overhead. “It has risen again. Even from Wendor’s grave it haunts my people.”

More mysticism and superstitions, sighed Picard to himself.

At the woman’s urging, the group refilled their canteens and resumed their journey. The road gradually narrowed as they now sharply ascended into the mountains.

At this elevation, the peaks of the Evacca were finally visible, and they were unlike any mountain range that Picard had ever seen. The acute peaks rose tall and narrow – palisades crowning the secrets of the Evacca’s keep.

Without clear provocation, Shalayus abruptly stopped and raised her gaze to meet the gravity of the dagger-like peaks. At first, Picard thought that the young woman was reassessing their direction, then he realized that she was whispering what sounded like a solemn prayer. They were finally nearing their destination.

They continued to wind their ascent through a long curving path that eventually narrowed to the point where they were forced to approach in single file. A lower elevation range of peaks soon surrounded them.

Picard paused to sip from his canteen and to wipe the sweat from his forehead before proceeding. The trail continued to curve for several minutes until the view suddenly opened before them.

They stood at the rim of a large basin – at least three kilometers in diameter. Stretching far above the valley floor, five sauropodous limbs rose from the basin in asymmetric curves. While much of the outer plating remained intact, several areas had decayed enough to expose the massive tritanium framework underneath.

“A ship,” deduced Picard as he stared in wonderment. “It’s the ship that brought your ancestors from Wendor,” he exclaimed – his archeological enthusiasm eclipsing his fatigue.

“Yes, Captain,” confirmed Shalayus, her head remained downcast with reverence. “This is the *Jadi K’Tor*. I do not believe that there is an accurate translation in your language. At once, it means both ‘*aftermath*’ and ‘*beginning*’”.

As Picard continued to scan the basin, he could detect large patches where the ship’s dark celadon hull was still visible, yet unclaimed by the valley. Using the visible portions as a reference, he tried to mentally reconstruct the design of the entire ship, but he failed at each attempt. The *Jadi K’Tor* was unlike any craft he had ever encountered.

Troi eyed the derelict ship with a sense of dread. The five serpentine necks made it seem like some hideous hydra. Each structure was encased in a biomechanical exoskeleton that only magnified its hellish appearance.

Data studied the craft from several vantage points along the basin’s rim. He surveyed the valley, trying his best to reverse engineer the ship’s design. Although the basin had reclaimed much of the ship, he could not detect anything that resembled a propulsion system, sensor or

weapon arrays. As Picard approached him, he could see that Data was even more intrigued with the derelict craft than he was.

“Data, does this ship match any design recorded by the Federation?” Picard asked, raising his voice to be heard over the thin atmosphere.

“Since much of the ship is buried, it is difficult to extrapolate its full design. But there is no record of any similar ship encountered by the Federation,” he replied.

Picard took a step closer and lowered his voice just enough to only be heard by the android. “Data, when we return to the *Enterprise*, I want you and Mr. LaForge to determine how this ship evaded our initial scans”, said Picard in a hushed voice.

“Yes, Captain,” Data replied.

“We’re almost at our destination,” Shalyus announced as she approached them.

She led them for several more minutes around the perimeter of the basin as the group took parting glimpses of the forsaken craft. The trail remained flat and led to a large fissure in the rockface visible in the distance. Picard couldn’t tell from their current location if the opening was natural or fabricated.

As they approached it, they could discern intricate glyphs carved along the frame of the entranceway. Shalayus paused and waited until the others caught up to her before entering.

The passageway was constructed as a series of crisscrossing vaulted arches that loomed overhead like a vast and elaborate web. It was cool and damp, and the only sounds were the soft echo of their footsteps against the cavernous ceiling.

An occasional nest could be seen built inside a ceiling nook and the resident lizard-like creatures squawked at the intruders.

Sunlight was visible at the far end, and they soon exited the passage and entered a large plaza.

The away team paused in awe as they exited the passage. The surrounding mountainside had been transformed into a cathedral-like city.

Entire peaks and ridges had been hewn into multi-tier conical towers of stone.

Each circular layer was demarcated by a rampart that wrapped its circumference. At even intervals along each level, large biomorphic tubular formations were carved into the rockface – like drops of melted candle wax that had suddenly cooled. Each of these exposed an entrance to a passage that burrowed deep onto the mountains. There must have been hundreds of entrances, concluded Picard.

He stood in awe as he gazed upon the city’s remains. The metropolis must have easily housed tens of thousands. Picard imagined the city in its prime – the descendants of Wendor filling the plaza, traversing the bridges, peering out from the stone portals.

The exposed rock varied between shades of ash and lavender sandstone, occasionally streaked with thick bands of onyx; pages from Sindar’s geological past.

Great arched stone bridges connected the various peaks, supported by diagonal piers at either base. They spanned overhead, casting an intricate arterial network of shadows upon the ground.

At various points along the peaks, magnificent flying buttresses protruded out from the mountains in even intervals – each bearing the same eerily biomechanical exoskeleton aesthetic as the *Jadi K’Tor*. Picard correctly concluded that they were required to support the areas of the mountainside that had been extensively burrowed.

Troi felt the same sense of dismay she experienced when examining the remains of the *Jadi K’Tor*. There was something eerily unnatural about this place and its appearance. The ancient city was a mausoleum.

An occasional bird flew above the city, indifferent to the legacy of the preeminent race that once lived below.

Shalayus raised her hands as she turned to face the away team. “This is *Nelimar*,” she announced. “This is the first-home.”

“Why did your ancestors abandon it?” Data asked.

Shalayus frowned. “They lived here for several generations until it was perceived as a prison. There was a growing sentiment among my ancestors that they should be exploring their new world, to embrace it, instead of living in exile. It was then that my ancestors separated into the original sixteen didain. Each group set out to explore the planet in hopes of finding a new home. They promised to unite again here after two years, but that promise was never kept.”

The captain turned to Shalayus. “I’m surprised that Dr. Creet spends any time in the village with the veritable treasure trove that is here for him to explore,” he observed. “He could spend the rest of his days exploring this city.”

Shalayus turned to Picard with a somber expression. “Dr. Creet is unaware of Nelimar’s existence.”

She then led them through the plaza, slowly treading along the brick road in silence. The bricks were composed of something that resembled an amalgam of metal and stone, dampening their steps which were virtually silent.

The young woman led them to a staircase near the far end of the plaza. They climbed the stairs and passed through an entranceway that led to a large circular room that could accommodate several hundred.

The room was unusual given the Sindarian’s typical austere nature. The circular walls were richly engraved with glyphs and carvings. Despite the millennia, the engravings were well preserved. Picard studied the markings that appeared to be words. He had never seen the Wendorian alphabet before – flowing curves, accentuated by a series of parallel lines and dots.

Data intently surveyed the carvings and gently placed his hands over the glyphs. He slowly made his way around one of the walls, gingerly touching each one with quiet fascination.

“Data, are you able to decipher any of the writing?” asked Picard.

“The symbols are unlike anything that I have ever encountered, Captain. It appears that the depth of the grooves and height of the ridges are specific for a given symbol. This would suggest that their written language is three-dimensional.”

Shalayus confirmed Data’s assertion with a simple nod.

“I would estimate that the Wendorian alphabet consists of hundreds of letters,” Data continued. “It would take considerable time to translate their meaning.”

A lone circle had been carved into the domed ceiling to permit the natural sunlight to fill the room – the circumference perfectly matching the size of Sindar’s sun from its terrestrial perspective.

Towards the far end of the room was a large stone altar. It rose some two meters from a raised platform in a half circle. To Troi, it felt

like a gravestone marking the passing of the inhabitants of this long dead city.

The altar's front was ornamented with a circular mosaic. Picard immediately recognized the mosaic as the same symbol he saw in the V'Dir's chamber – two interlocking waves – one black and one white.

The symbol was framed by a metal rim that brightly shimmered under the spell of the noon sun. Along the rim's surface, eight bright gems of various hues were equidistantly set – each the size of his fist.

“Now Captain, it is time for you to receive the first gift of the Kulu Sha,” ceremoniously announced Shalayus, taking a formal step forward.

She knelt in front of the mosaic and placed her left palm over the topmost jewel – a purple stone. With reverence, she slowly traced the rim with her hand, making certain to touch each stone in order.

Her hand returned to the top stone, and she let it linger upon the gem. It began to shine as her eyes began to glow green in parallel. She withdrew her hand and gently removed the stone from its bezel.

“J'lyle Kuuzaad!” she exclaimed as she briefly examined it.

She raised herself and ceremoniously offered the large oval jewel to Picard. “I present you with the first of two gifts that the Kulu Sha bestow upon you,” she said. “This is the Shilan Tir. It will offer you great strength against the Huundhraeyl.”

Picard politely accepted the talisman, obviously unsure of its practicality. The crystal had an unanticipated warmth as he held it.

Picard looked to Troi, but she shook her head. If the stone possessed any tangible purpose, she could not sense it. Picard scanned the room for Data and suddenly realized that the android was unaccounted for.

Shalayus gestured towards the room's apse. Picard's gaze followed and he spotted Data standing motionless in front of the recessed area. Picard and Troi followed and entered the apse and found Data transfixed upon a large circular relief carved into the red sandstone.

“I believe that this is a depiction of the stories that the elders shared with me last evening,” observed Data.

At the relief's center, a large reptilian bird rose upon fiery wings. Under its left wing was a sun – under its right were twin crescent moons. Terros and Foemos presumed Picard.

“Behold the DaliKor!” proclaimed Shalayus approaching from the rear.

Troi walked towards the relief to study the intense detail. She could sense something strong and powerful. At least from the residue of the hands that carved it and those that worshipped here.

Two bright purple jewels shone like eyes from a dark amorphous mass that appeared at the relief’s bottom edge. It appeared to be a pile of limbs – humanoid and otherwise – that grew from a grotesque shape whose final form remained elusive.

“What is this figure?” she asked without turning.

“Huundhraeyl,” whispered Shalayus as if fearing detection.

Between the forbidding form and the flaming raptor, there was a third subject – tall, humanoid – covered in flowing robes. Its face was hidden underneath a cowl except for its eyes made of purple stones.

Its hands were outstretched over its heart, one hand placed over the other – fingers bent at the hand, forming a diamond shape.

Both Picard and Data approached Troi, also oddly drawn to the figure.

“It is J’Conan Zorr – Zorr the Savior, Zorr the Revolver,” Shalayus announced.

“Revolver?” asked Picard, his curiosity piqued.

Shalayus nodded. “From him springs the power of revolution. The revolution forged from the cyclical balance of J’Kaar and J’Kree. He is a messiah who appears during times of strife upon Wendor. With each appearance, he heralds a New Era for my people.”

Suddenly the ground began to tremble, and a low hum filled the city. A large gust of wind billowed through the city’s catacombs, resonating through the hollowed peaks like a church organ.

“We must leave,” she warned. “The day begins to wane and a storm is approaching.” Although her voice remained calm, it conveyed enough urgency to mobilize them.

Several more wind gusts began to howl through the city. The low-pitched frequencies of the resulting drone were like a mantra echoing from a thousand worshipers.

To Troi, it seemed like a requiem resonating throughout this alien cathedral. Or maybe it was a call of something awakening from a long dormancy.

In single file they departed the Nelimar through the same passageway that they had entered. Before leaving, Picard paused and turned for one final gaze upon the oblique labyrinth.

Another time, he promised himself.

As they descended along the mountain trail, the cause for Shalayus's haste became apparent. Large storm clouds were rolling in from the west, as was typical for this time of year. If they failed to be below tree line before the storm started, they would be easy targets for the forcible winds and lightning.

They barely spoke on the return trip. Once they passed the storm's immediate danger, it began to lightly rain, revealing their second threat. The soil became slick in the rain and extra care was needed to maintain their balance given the downward momentum.

Picard pondered the significance of the curio that Shalayus had offered him. Peldin had instructed him to accept whatever assistance that the Sindarians offered. However, he doubted that the admiral would consider the purplish stone as fair remuneration.

When the group finally returned to the camp, the sun began to recede behind the western peaks. Either the rain had bypassed the encampment, or the traces of the storm had quickly vanished from the arid lowlands.

Without hesitation, Shalayus continued to lead them towards the center of the village, to the same location as the prior night's ceremonies. She appeared pressed, as if in danger of missing an important deadline.

As they reached the center of the village, they could see the faint green glow of a dozen or so Sindarians awaiting their arrival. To Picard, they seemed to form an alien constellation whose pattern he could not decipher.

As they drew closer, they could see that the small delegation was made up of older Sindarian women. Data performed a quick inventory and leaned towards the captain. "These are the elders of the Kulu Sha," he whispered.

At the center of the group, the V'Dir stood before them, dressed again in her ceremonial black robes. She leaned heavily upon her staff while studying the away team.

"Picard, it is my hope that the day will come when you have evolved upon the Path of Being and come to understand the true honor

of what we have bestowed upon you today. You and your team are the first alien race to visit Nelimar and you and your team are the first aliens to receive a kala stone,” she said.

“We are greatly honored,” Picard replied.

“You have in your possession the Shilan Tir. Be true to its power, Picard. It is the tranquility of the storm, the order within chaos.”

Picard nodded low with respect.

“We offer one other gift. We offer Shalayus Mithyrial to accompany you on your journey to the home world. She will be your guide, your herald.”

At the V’Dir’s words, Shalayus turned to face Picard and formally bowed low in offering.

Picard hesitated. He couldn’t possibly allow a civilian to accompany him on what could very well turn out to be a bloody confrontation with the Romulans. However, he knew that refusing the V’Dir’s offering would be a great insult that would further alienate the Sindarians from the Federation.

Peldin’s words still freshly echoed in his ears – ‘*Accept whatever assistance they offer*’. And there was maybe another voice urging him to agree – one he could not identify.

“V’Dir, we are humbled by the gifts that you bestow upon us, and accept them graciously,” said Picard in a tone that seemed peculiar even to him. In the distance, one of the small animals cried in the dark.

Shalayus approached the V’Dir and they warmly embraced. The V’Dir held the young woman in the strength of her gaze before Shalayus returned to the company of the away team. The V’Dir advanced towards Picard and placed her hands in front of her heart, creating the same diamond shape as the prophet in the relief.

“Beware, Picard,” she whispered in warning. “Beware the choice of the moons, they are the sentinels of fate. They hold dominion over the Path of Being, the path that you now tread. *Kulusuta dien mi Tan.*”

Picard felt dazed, bewitched by words that he could not understand. After a long pause, he tapped his communication pin. “*Enterprise*, prepare four to beam up.”

A moment later, the village began to dissolve around him until only the collective glow of their green eyes was visible. It was then that Picard noticed Dr. Creet – standing just outside the circle of elders. The

old man smiled a customary smile but deep within those eyes Picard thought he detected a warning. The old man continued to smile but the caution in his eyes was the last sight that filled Picard's mind as he departed Sindar.

CHAPTER SIX

Within an instant, the diffused scene of the transporter room was reassembled. Worf was hunched over the transporter control console with a sour expression – unhappy with the news that an unexpected fourth party was beaming aboard.

To Troi, it seemed as if only moments had transpired aboard the *Enterprise* since the away team had beamed down to Sindar.

She was fatigued, both physically and mentally. The strain of the day’s journey into the Evacca mountains was second only to the challenge of withstanding the Sindarian’s intensity. The mental strength of their collective was draining and daunting. She was thankful to return to the sanctum of the ship. She longed for her quarters and the promise of a full night’s sleep.

“J’lyle Kuuzaad!” exclaimed Shalayus as she examined her reconstituted extremities in awe.

Worf eyed the young woman with the same gratuitous suspicion that he extended to all unanticipated visitors. Admittedly, his response was mixed with frustration from all the last-minute security considerations that were needed with an unannounced arrival of a traveling dignitary.

As Worf studied the young woman more closely, noting her slender frame and golden-brown complexion, his doubt soon yielded to fascination. Her probing eyes immediately detected his scrutiny, capturing him within their emerald magnetism. He wanted to turn away but found himself unable to unlock the woman’s gaze.

“Utsa Lia Tama Radae!” she called to Worf, hurrying from the transporter platform towards him. She examined him before placing both hands upon his forehead crest. Worf remained motionless as the woman gently touched the ridges upon his head.

“This is Lieutenant Worf, Chief of Security,” introduced Picard. “You will find that this ship is filled with representatives from many of the worlds belonging to the Federation. Mr. Worf is a member of a very unique and proud race of people known as the...”

“Klingons,” interrupted Shalayus. “My people know of them. The Klingons are popular among the legends of my people, a wild race of proud warriors who resisted the Wendorian teachings. They were

affectionately known as the Uutsa Lia Tama Radae, ‘*The Untamed*’. As children, we were often told stories about their battles. They are forever in our hearts, for they were adored by the Wendorians as mischievous children,” Shalayus fondly recalled. “No offense, Lieutenant,” she quickly amended.

“No offense assumed,” assured Worf with what Picard would almost discern as a smile.

“Lieutenant, please show Shalayus Mithyrial to her quarters,” requested Picard. “In the morning, assign one of your staff to escort her upon a tour of the ship.”

“Yes, Captain.”

“Captain, if I may,” petitioned Shalayus. “I would request that Lieutenant Worf personally show me your ship.”

“Of course,” agreed Picard while dismissing them both for the evening. Immediately, Shalayus took Worf’s arm in her own and let the Klingon guide her through the doors that quietly closed behind them.

“Captain, if you have no other use of my services, I would respectfully request that I be dismissed,” said Data. “I am eager to review my personal logs since beaming down to Sindar so that I may add the findings to my research.”

“Of course, Lieutenant,” agreed Picard. “You too, Deanna. We have earned ourselves a good night’s rest.”

As Picard watched the departing figures, he finally allowed himself to admit his own fatigue. After a quick stretch, he hailed to the bridge. “Number One, set our course for the Khuln system. Warp nine.”

Will Riker navigated his way through the congestion of Ten-Forward, skillfully balancing the creamy synthale within each of the two oversized mugs. Even at this late hour, the lounge was crowded – clamoring with conviviality. Grimly, Riker was aware of the correlation between the hazard of a mission and the size of the congregation that gathered in Ten-Forward. There was no study in existence that explored this phenomenon, and admittedly it was solely based upon his own observations.

In his heart, he didn't need the empirical evidence to know that on the eve of a perilous mission, the members of the crew reached out for the companionship and camaraderie of their fellow officers.

Riker returned to his table and noted that one of the four vacant chairs was missing, the commodity apparently appropriated by the demands of the growing crowd. He rested one of the two mugs on the table, directly in front of Geordi LaForge's stagnant expression.

"Thanks, Commander," he distantly acknowledged.

Will nodded, quietly studying the withdrawn figure. LaForge was slumped over the table, resting his chin upon his crossed arms. Riker couldn't tell if the Chief Engineer was tired or self-soothing. Whatever he was thinking was well hidden behind his VISOR.

Even with his eyes hidden from the world, Geordi's emotions were almost always transparent. His voice and body language fully telegraphed his feelings. Riker wondered if LaForge learned to compensate or if his heightened mannerisms were simply unconscious adaptations.

On the few occasions that LaForge needed to shield his private thoughts, he could simply withdraw into his VISOR. There were times when Riker almost envied having the prosthetic.

Riker took his seat while sipping from his ale. "Geordi, you look as if you might be better off getting some sleep in your quarters instead of capping off an evening in Ten-Forward," suggested Will.

"I know, but I've added an extra shift to prep Engineering. Just in case... I have to go back in a little while to check up on things."

Riker took another deep draught from the mug and smacked his lips together with the ale's bite. "Well, Geordi, your initiative is well noted, but you may be getting ahead of yourself without cause. Nothing has been confirmed," he offered with weak optimism. "If we do encounter the Romulans, there's every chance that the situation will be handled diplomatically. It always has in the past. The captain will explore every opportunity."

Riker's voice dropped to a whisper, fearing that even in the din his voice would carry. It was still uncertain how much of the Romulan insurrection was common knowledge among the rest of the crew.

"No offense to the captain, but if the Romulans have crossed over into Federation territory and destroyed an unarmed science ship without

provocation, I don't think that they are considering a diplomatic exchange," LaForge bleakly predicted. He finally straightened himself and drank quickly from his mug. He shook his head apologetically and returned to the First Officer. "I'm sorry, I just haven't slept much."

"It's okay," consoled Will. "I've also put myself under a rigid schedule. We're all under a lot of pressure."

Through the throng of people, a figure quietly approached their table, catching Will's attention. It was Deanna, although her withdrawn expression and listless gait made her almost unrecognizable. A young ensign nearly backed into her, but she took little notice as if in a trance. As she approached, Will's concern deepened. Gone was the young woman who joyously celebrated her birthday just days ago. Her cadence was slow, as if carrying a burden and her expression was one of fatigue. Fatigue and defeat.

"Counselor," vacantly greeted LaForge.

"Deanna," welcomed Riker as he offered Troi the last empty chair. "I thought that you'd be asleep at this hour."

"I can't sleep," she said, rubbing both eyes with her palms.

Geordi corroborated with a slight nod.

"No, I mean that I'm unable to sleep. Since I beamed down to Sindar, I've been having these dreadful dreams. I just can't make it through the night. I'm sure that once I've put enough distance between myself and that planet, everything will be alright."

Riker eyed Deanna with concern. It was more than the dark circles forming under her eyes. It was the vacancy in her expression. Nightmares to an empath were not something to take lightly. For many Betazoids, recurring nightmares become a serious illness that threatened their sanity.

"What are the dreams about? Are you having nightmares about our mission?" Will asked, not entirely certain that he really wanted to hear her response.

"No, not the future. Not really," replied Troi. "The images are brief and flicker back and forth in time. I really don't remember much when I wake. But the images that I do remember seem to be in the past, a long time ago on Wendor. Most of them anyway."

"What kind of images?" pressed Will, inverting their appointed positions. While it was Troi's role to counsel the crew, he had always

been the one that she could turn to. He wanted to reassure her that despite the trajectory of their relationship, he would always be her confidant.

“Dr. Creet told us of his hypothesis that Wendor was at war with another planet. I see images that seem to support his theory. I see thousands of people being incinerated at once, death and destruction on a massive scale.” She shook with the memory of it.

“You said that not all of the dreams were in the past,” said Will.

“Well, I see a ship. I think it’s the *Leviathan*, and it’s consumed by a bright light. I see the entire crew overcome as the ship explodes. Then there’s the chilling sound of laughter. It’s full of scorn and contempt. It’s dreadful.”

“What does it all mean?” asked LaForge, lifting his head. He was eager for any confirmation that whatever destroyed the *Leviathan* was not Romulan in origin.

Deanna shook her head and shrugged. “I’m sure that if I could get some sleep, I would be able to piece it together with a clear mind. But I’m just so tired that I can’t separate myself from my dreams. I can’t read them with any sense of impartiality.”

“I don’t have to tell you just how dangerous that could be for a Betazoid,” cautioned Riker. “Why don’t you see if Dr. Crusher can provide you with a sleep inducement?”

“I don’t know if I want her to give me something that will make it difficult to wake up,” she said, her voice sounded exhausted. “If I couldn’t end the dream, it would be worse for me.”

“Counselor, I understand that someone from the planet beamed up with you,” noted Geordi, intentionally shifting the conversation for her benefit. “Was it Dr. Creet?”

“No. It was a young Sindarian woman, Shalayus Mithyriel. She was asked by the clan’s matriarch to act as a guide to whatever we may encounter on Wendor.”

“Whatever we may encounter?” repeated Geordi with curiosity. “That sounds pretty ominous. What do they think happened?”

“They think that an evil spirit called the Huundhraeyl is behind all of this,” Troi smiled with slight embarrassment. “I know how crazy it all sounds in Ten-Forward, but back on Sindar, it was almost chilling.”

Will paused to take another sip of his ale. “What are they like?” he gently asked, attempting to shift the conversation away from whatever

was troubling her. At first, she didn't respond, keeping her focus upon the table. Will would have simply dismissed it as a product of her fatigue, but he knew it was something more. Deanna was confronted with a sense of defeat, as if something had wounded her psyche. "Will, I spent almost two days with them. Believe me, it would take even longer for me to give you my impressions of them. Maybe in the morning..."

Riker acquiesced. He was not used to seeing her so rattled, and it concerned him. "Well, does she even understand that she's on a ship?" he asked, pivoting the conversation. "I'm surprised that the captain didn't deny this V'Dir's offer, with all the implications this could have in violating the Prime Directive."

Deanna laughed, dismissing his concern. "Trust me, Will. The Prime Directive is not a concern here. I don't know how to explain it, but there is little that we could do that would alter their development," she sighed, again rubbing her swollen eyes. "Although they lead a very simple existence, they are a very advanced race of beings. They are very fully aware of the universe around them, probably more than we are. As for being aboard a starship... Although they have no ships of their own, I wouldn't be surprised if Shalayus was able to fly this ship after a few days."

"Well, I have to get back to Engineering, I've got an inspection to perform," Geordi concluded as he downed the remaining contents of his mug as he rose from the table. He sensed the anxiety in his own voice. He hoped that Deanna's experience with the Sindarians would eliminate a Romulan encounter from the equation. It didn't and maybe hinted at something even darker.

"I should be heading back too," said Will. "I have a meeting with the department heads. We will need extra coverage. Just in case..." He rose from the table and paused as Deanna barley acknowledged him. She looked so vulnerable.

"Deanna, can I walk you back to your quarters?" he offered in a tone that equally hinted of empathy and concern.

"No, thank you, Will. I think I'll just sit here for a while."

Will did his best to hide his injured expression. While they remained close, Deanna was diligent in maintaining the boundaries of their revised relationship. He lost his claim at being her knight in shining armor, and he didn't like to be reminded of it.

“You’re alright?” he asked in a lower, more intimate voice.

“Yes,” she assured with a thin smile.

He knew that his expression belied his thoughts. Deanna didn’t need to employ her empathic powers to detect his injury. He was again reminded of his admiration for Geordi’s VISOR.

Will knew better than to press the issue. Deanna didn’t like to be coddled. Without any further debate, the First Officer withdrew from the table and accompanied Geordi. Together, they departed through the crowds of Ten-Forward.

With a heavy sigh, Deanna wearily eased back into her chair, swiveling it to face the viewing ports. She wasn’t sure if it was to admire the view, or to isolate herself from the crowd’s cheer.

She found the seclusion comforting. It helped her to disengage from her empathic abilities and rest. Whatever the Sindarians were, they proved more alien to her than any other humanoid species she had ever encountered. She continued to gaze out the port, surrendering to her fatigue.

By the virtue of warp travel, the stars streaked past with rainbowed trails – echoes of Time’s Arrow that pointed in the direction of the *Enterprise*’s fate. But as Deanna continued to stare, the prismatic streaks cut space like daggers that pointed in anger towards a destination that hungrily awaited their arrival.

After only a brief pause, the door chimed a second time. Worf frowned at the caller’s apparent impatience. “Enter,” he permitted.

The door to the guest quarters opened with a subdued hush as Picard entered the room.

Work stiffened to attention. “Captain.”

“Lieutenant, I was looking for our guest,” said Picard. “I didn’t realize that you were still in her company after the ship’s tour.”

“Yes, Captain,” Work confirmed. “After our tour this morning, I brought her to the ship’s tailor. She wished to wear something appropriate for this evening’s dinner.”

Shalayus emerged from the bedroom and approached the two officers. She wore a teal-turquoise gown that perfectly complimented her

bronze complexion and raven hair. It shimmered softly under the muted lighting of her quarters as her emerald eyes sparkled with a subdued radiance. She glowed like the aurora borealis reflecting from a frozen tundra.

“Well, do I look appropriate?” she playfully asked.

Worf squirmed, unsuccessfully struggling with a response.

“You look radiant,” complimented Picard.

“Captain, I must thank you for allowing me to tour your ship,” she said. “You have every reason to be proud of it. It is a very impressive vessel.”

“Well, you had an excellent guide,” said Picard. “Worf’s knowledge of this ship is second only to the Chief Engineer, a testimony to his commitment as Security Officer.”

“Thank you, Captain,” acknowledged Worf who allowed himself a final moment to dwell on the woman’s beauty. “If you will excuse me, I must be returning to my post.”

The captain nodded his dismissal.

“Will I see you at dinner this evening?” asked Shalayus.

“Of course. I would not miss an occasion given in your honor,” promised the Klingon.

Shalayus smiled and bowed, her equivalent of a curtsy. She locked the Klingon in the promise of her gaze and for an awkward moment, Picard felt like an intruder. Finally, Worf broke the spell and exited the quarters, extending a formal nod to the captain.

“Captain, please sit and be comfortable,” invited Shalayus, her gown floating – echoing each movement of her body.

The guest quarters reserved for traveling dignitaries were spacious, rivaling his own. Picard politely refused, preferring a more formal posture. “Shalayus, I was hoping that I may make use of your services.”

“Yes, Captain? What is your request?”

The captain walked over to the desk against the far wall and activated the computer console.

“Computer, prepare playback of the *Leviathan*’s final log, begin the sequence at position three-zero-two-nine,” he commanded, before turning to Shalayus. “This is the final entry of the *Leviathan*’s log transmitted from the ship’s flight recorder. Had it not been for the

surveillance network surrounding the Neutral Zone, it may have been a long time until we received this. Computer, begin playback.”

Shalayus positioned herself in front of the monitor and watched the sequence with great intent. The image of Lieutenant DeCristo appeared just as his plea for help was truncated, leaving Sydell to erupt his final orders under the imposing shadow of the moon Terros. In an instant the bright light exploded across oblivion, devouring the ship in its rage. The light intensified upon Shalayus’s face, overcoming the transfixed glow of her green eyes. She gasped in horror and turned away from the light’s hunger. It gradually faded as the room’s shadows lengthened.

She whispered something under her breath – some lament in her native language.

“Do you have any idea what caused this? I need to understand the risk to my people and my ship.”

“It is the Huundhraeyl, Captain. It is the shadow of wisdom, the heart of despair, the *gorgunith*.”

Picard sighed at the impenetrable obstacle that towered before him. Shalayus’s uncompromising faith separated him from understanding the forces that sent over one hundred and fifty Starfleet officers to their death. “Shalayus, is there anything more that you can tell me. Some tangible information that I can use to prevent this ship from sharing the *Leviathan*’s fate. There are over one thousand crew members currently aboard this vessel.”

The young woman remained silent, but her indignation was unmistakable. “Captain, clearly you do not share the beliefs of my people. I can tell you nothing more than what I have already shared. If you do not believe that the shadow of the Huundhraeyl has reawakened to threaten the galaxy, what do you believe destroyed the science ship? Lieutenant Worf was eager to point out that this is the flagship of your Federation. If you deem our beliefs so trivial, why has such importance been assigned to this mission? Surely, your experts can offer a hundred more pragmatic explanations of what destroyed that ship.”

“For over two hundred years, the Federation has upheld a delicate truce with a very aggressive race of beings. This race is extremely warlike, and it is our fear that this tenuous neutrality has finally collapsed,

an event that would cast this part of the galaxy into a savage war that would forever alter the landscape of power.”

“You speak of the Romulans.”

“You know of them,” acknowledged Picard, no longer awed by the breadth of knowledge that the Sindarians possessed.

“Yes, they are the warring brothers of the Vulcans. I have heard many tales of their bloody conquests and exploitations. I understand your Federation’s fear.”

“My superiors are considering placing all ships on standby alert,” informed Picard. “If there is any other insight that you can offer that would reduce the growing alarm within Starfleet, it would be of great value”

“None, Captain,” she flatly refused. “I have already told you what destroyed the science vessel. You tolerate my beliefs but dismiss them as simple mythology. The V’Dir was correct in her observation of your Federation’s paradox. She explained that by absorbing so many varied and contradicting cultures, your people have become faithless, void of your own convictions.”

“Your V’Dir is wrong,” he sharply corrected. “By the advantage of the immeasurable wealth of beliefs that enriches the Federation, we can freely identify with those values that hold the most personal truth or reinforce our native beliefs through the juxtaposition of alternative ideas.”

“What of your beliefs, Picard? Tell me of the philosophy that impels you as you search the cosmos in pursuit of the unknown. You maintain your desire to insulate your crew from danger. The only way you will truly succeed in that wish is not by understanding the stratagems of your enemy, but rather by understanding your own morality.”

Picard remained oblique. He had come here to probe her and now it was he that was under scrutiny. His personal ideology was not a matter for idle debate, especially with a complete stranger. But he couldn’t simply placate the women’s inquiry with pretension. It was clear that anything less than an honest response would only diminish his standing with the woman. He wasn’t exactly sure why her opinion of him mattered, but it did.

With pronounced difficulty, Picard responded. “Some believe that evil is the opposite power of good, but I believe it is the lack of power.

Evil is nothing more than the absence of discipline, of empathy and love. The absence of light.”

The glow within Shalayus’s eyes fractionally grew. “You will find that our journeys are not so distant, Captain. You are indeed upon the path of Being, perhaps further along than the V’Dir guessed. But I will say to you, in terms of your own analogy, there are places where light’s revelation has never shined. In those places, as the eons pass without measure, the ghost of wisdom failed holds dominion.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

The dining table of the Captain's Mess boasted a fusion of cuisine from various cultures. The mess attendants had exceeded Picard's expectations. He expected an officer's meal that included a sampling of dishes from across the Federation. The final result was a more ceremonial banquet fit for a traveling dignitary. Picard suspected Gunian quietly oversaw the preparations.

The main table was fitted with fine linen and hosted numerous dishes, personal favorites of the officers ranging from Bajoran sweet breads to Klingon serpent worms. The aromas formed a chorus that lured the hungry guests to their chairs.

The mess attendants worked diligently throughout the evening to uphold the linen's virtue – carefully inserting themselves between the seated guests as to not disturb their conversations. The subdued ambiance of the room was maintained by the glow of candlelight that swayed in time to the backdrop of classical music.

The captain instructed for the courses to be served *d'lokia* style, pairing congruent food with their common wine complement. Data, under Picard's charge, programmed the replicators to produce a rough estimation of the frajelen that they had sampled upon Sindar.

Deanna found herself drifting away from the conversations while staring into the mesmerizing candlelight. For the third time, she discreetly concealed a yawn behind her napkin. Although the dinner was festive, Troi couldn't ward off her fatigue, fully certain that another sleepless night awaited her.

As the shadow of the Kulu Sha's collective abated in Sindar's wake, a new sense of foreboding threatened her dreams. There was a darker undertow behind the ancient images of Wendor's fate that slowly began to reveal itself from the shadows.

While rubbing her swollen eyes, she detected Shalayus's concerned gaze from the far end of the table. The woman was young, appearing to be not many years beyond the Sindarian equivalent of adolescence. However, she carried herself with a greater perspicacity than just about anyone Troi had ever known.

Troi immediately rejected the young woman's gaze and the gentle tingle of her probing, fully appreciating the irony of her actions. Deanna's standing with the young woman had suddenly reversed. She only hoped that she would prove as successful as the Sindarians at insulating her private thoughts.

"Shalayus, how are you finding your way around the ship?" Dr. Crusher politely asked while taking a pause from her meal. The fourth round of dishes were already being served as the mess attendants labored with creating vacancies on the table.

"Yes, quite well. Utsa Lia..." she paused with an embarrassed smile. "I mean Lieutenant Worf," she corrected, "is an excellent guide. He was determined that I understood the layout of the ship so that I would not have to rely upon assistance."

"Utsa Lia?" poked Geordi with a mischievous grin. The Klingon reciprocated with an exaggerated scowl.

"The captain discussed his experiences on your planet at great length," prefaced Crusher. "I was wondering what your didain does for medical assistance. How do you detect and treat illnesses and injuries?"

"Our ways transcend the symptomatic approach practiced by the Federation," Shalayus said.

Beverly forced a smile that barely concealed her pique. "I'm intrigued by your people's way of life. It appears rewarding in both its simplicity and purity."

"You are mistaken," corrected Shalayus. "The ways of the Kulu Sha lead away from the paths of purity. That which serves the greater good cannot be so vulnerable. We choose wisdom over virtue."

"Many cultures believe that purity is the epitome of goodness," Data noted.

"That is unfortunate, and misguided. That which is untried is the first undone. It is through misdeed that the truest path of goodness lies. Although it is a paradox, within the eye of contradiction stands truth."

"Are you suggesting that by committing immoral acts, goodness is best served?" inferred the doctor, unable to contain her skepticism.

"No," rejected Shalayus. "Rather that truth is revealed in error, wisdom through experience. Redemption teaches a stronger lesson than innocence."

“I am intrigued by your beliefs, Shalayus,” observed Data. “They represent a philosophy that is unfamiliar to me.”

“That is regrettable,” she responded. “Experience is the Path of Being that we all tread.”

One of the staff quietly circled the perimeter of the table, refreshing the glasses with Andorian Blue.

“Shalayus, our existence must appear very different from that of your didain,” said Data responding to the inexplicable hush that befell the table. He could detect the alternation in the general mood but could not fathom the cause of it.

“On the contrary, my people are also explorers. We follow the way of the wind, the wind of the Dalikor. And like you, we each serve a specific function within our didain,” she noted before allowing a small frown. “However, I must admit that I do miss my home.”

“Being aboard a starship just takes a little getting used to,” empathized Riker.

“Shalayus, I can program one of the ship’s holodecks to approximate your camp in the Evacca mountains,” offered Data.

“Your offer is generous. However, I find the idea of the holodecks reprehensible.”

“Shalayus, the holodecks provide a very real benefit to the crew,” defended Troi. “Early studies noted an adverse psychophysiological effect to prolonged space travel, common to most species. It was later discovered that most sentient beings possess an inherent link to their natural environment. This link is formed by millions of years of evolution and is responsible for shaping the relative intellect, instincts and genetic profile of each race. When an individual is separated from their environment for an extended time, they become susceptible to depression and host of cognitive disorders. The holodecks were originally designed to provide the crew with visually accurate simulations of a variety of natural environments, to appeal to their more subconscious stimuli.”

Shalayus shook her head. “But those images are false – they are deceptions. You cater to your vulnerabilities and pacify them with a series of sterile illusions. The more technological control that your kind attempts to exert over your environment, the more its inherent essence becomes lost. You are not embracing the frontiers of space, instead you are coddling your primal instincts and simply insulating yourselves from

what the universe is offering. You should be learning to overcome your primitive fetters that bound you to your home world instead of placating them. The evolution of your respective species demands it.”

“Shalayus, with all respect, I believe that your generalization is unfair,” said Picard with exception, but Shalayus was not subdued.

“Long ago,” she continued, “your species forsook the forests and the savannas after millions of years of evolution in pursuit of progress. The fruit of that search is the exploration of space, the very soul of nature. It is no wonder why your people are so ill prepared for the encounters that the universe brings.”

“You seem to have a very strong opinion about a race of people that you know very little about,” observed Riker with growing ire.

“You are incorrect, we know a great deal of your kind,” she said. “The Wendorians amassed an immeasurable amount of data of all the species that they encountered over the millennia. A replication of that data still survives, long after my ancestors left Wendor and arrived upon Sindar. Also, we have had the opportunity to study one of your kind firsthand.”

“It was my understanding that Dr. Creet joined the Kulu Sha to learn more about your people,” Picard said.

“The only reason that we consented to having the doctor join our didain was because we wished to learn more about humans,” countered Shalayus. “Do you think that we would condone to being observed like wild animals on the brink of extinction?”

“Is that how the V’Dir was so well informed of the Federation – though Dr. Creet?” Picard.

“No, Dr. Creet only served to confirm our understanding. We have studied the ways of your Federation since its inception and the V’Dir is an authority. Captain, do not repeat your mistake in believing your perceptions that we are nothing more than a race of simple nomadic tribespeople.”

“The V’Dir is a very intriguing individual,” Picard understated with full implication.

“I believe you mean to say that you found her challenging,” Shalayus clarified. “The V’Dir fully appreciates her responsibilities. As the leader of our didain she is as stern as her responsibilities dictate. But I can assure you that as a mother she is compassionate beyond measure.”

“The V’Dir is your mother?” asked Picard, surprised at the revelation.

“Yes, Captain. That is why I was selected to accompany you on this mission. The Mithyrial bloodline is a noble one,” she stated.

Shalayus paused and took a deep breath. She gently discarded her napkin and utensils upon the table.

“Captain, I must now request your leave,” she announced. “I apologize for not staying the length of the meal, but I am suddenly feeling very tired from my journey aboard your ship.”

“Of course,” Picard consented as he politely rose from the table. The rest of the guests followed his example.

Shalayus rose from her chair and prepared to leave. Instead, she lingered, gripping the back of her chair for support. Her arms trembled and her body became unsteady. Dr. Crusher immediately moved towards her, but Shalayaus warded her off – refusing any assistance.

“I’m all right, Doctor. I’m just a little lightheaded,” she assured before suddenly slipping into unconsciousness. Worf sprang towards her and caught her body between both of his arms as she collapsed into darkness.

“Shalayus, you need to hold still!” demanded Dr. Crusher.

The young patient admonished the doctor with a petulant stare of emerald fire. While Nurse Sato gently guided the woman to lay back down onto the bio-bed, Crusher intently studied the readings on the biofunction monitor as she hovered over her combative patient.

“Do not touch me, Doctor!” Shalayus warned. “I demand that you release me at once.”

“I will not,” rejected Crusher with clear authority. “Not until I’m fully certain what was wrong with you. I want to be sure that you pose no risk to the crew, or they to you.”

Shalayus regrouped with a more amiable approach. “I’m fine now,” Shalayus confirmed. “I just felt lightheaded.”

“Well, I must make some assumptions without a clear baseline for your species. But you do appear to be in perfect health,” Crusher confirmed.

Shalayus's stare became more resolute. "Then let me leave." she sternly said.

"Not so soon," reciprocated Crusher with equal assertiveness. "I want to keep you here for further observation."

"I protest!" stormed Shalayus. "I will not be treated like a curiosity. You're keeping me here like a prisoner. I object to your Federation's mistreatment."

"When we rendezvous with the nearest Starbase you can lodge a formal protest," offered the doctor. "Until then, you are in my care. The sooner you cooperate, the sooner you'll be released."

The doors to sickbay opened and Will Riker entered. Shalayus began to renew her protest as soon as she saw the First Officer approach. Riker rolled his eyes and immediately bypassed her, quickly dismissing with any pleasantries.

"How is she, Doctor?" he asked, identifying the patient only with a brief nod in her direction.

Dr. Crusher gestured to Sato to continue taking readings as she discreetly led Riker away from Shalayus's bed.

At a safe distance, Crusher paused and gazed again at her patient. "She seems fine, Will. There are no traces of any kind of known infection. It could be nothing more than a natural reaction to her traveling at warp speed for the first time"

"So, she's fine now?" asked Will.

"Yes, I believe so," she offered optimistically. "Without knowing more of her species, the best I can do is give you a well-educated guess. I'm going to keep her under observation overnight."

"The captain wanted to know if there was anything unusual in her physiology."

"Well, she's basically humanoid, with some minor variations. The most significant are two additional oval glands located behind the muscles at the base of either side of her lower jaw. It's unclear what function, if any, they serve. They may very well be vestigial."

Will nodded politely, but the observations would offer little significance to the captain.

"I was able to perform a brief brain scan," added Crusher, sensing Riker's disappointment.

"And?" pressed Riker.

“She has an extremely high Crellium transfer rate. Much of Crellium mapping is only theory, but if you support the theory...” she trailed, hinting at the significance of Shalayus’s readings. “Well, suffice to say, we’re dealing with a very advanced individual.”

“How so?”

“Her rate of Crellium transfer suggests that her conscious mind occupies a significantly higher percentage of the brain than ours does. At her level, she may be able to consciously select which portions of her brain store information, react to specific stimuli, even function in her sleep. Also, a high Crellium transfer rate is indicative of powerful telepathic potential.”

“Does she pose any threat to this ship?” he pointedly asked.

“I don’t believe so. We have seen no evidence to suggest that she would, or to what extent of her powers are developed.” Crusher said. “Will, what is this about?”

“The captain suggested that the Sindarians may have less than clear intentions regarding this mission.”

Beverly paused but gave an inquisitive nod to Riker. She fully wanted to understand the implications of his response but now was not the time nor the place. “I’ll let you know more when my analysis is completed,” she promised.

“Thanks,” smiled Will as he turned and headed towards the exit. He was determined to bypass Shalayus who he suddenly realized had grown quiet. His resolve was no match for her, and he stopped midstride and turned to her, drawn by her intense gaze.

Shalayus remained as stone, but he somehow knew that she had heard every word of his conversation with Dr. Crusher. He had the feeling that she knew every private thought he had since she boarded the *Enterprise*.

He forced himself away from the trance and exited through the doors just as Worf entered.

“Lieutenant,” Riker greeted Worf with a formal nod, renewing his pace to leave the medical facility. When Shalayus saw Worf enter the room, she welcomed him with a bright smile.

“Utsa Lia!”

Worf approached the bed and squarely turned to Dr. Crusher. “May I have a moment with her, Doctor?” Worf requested.

“Of course,” agreed Crusher with a suspecting grin. She turned to her assistant and together they continued their rounds.

Worf decisively waited until the figures reached a satisfactory distance before he returned his attention to the young woman. “I wanted to see how you were feeling,” offered Worf with a distinctly less formal tone.

“I’m fine,” she assured.

Worf grinned. “I also came to ask if you would accompany me to the ship’s arboretum. I heard the words that you spoke during dinner. I wanted to show you that we rely upon more than the holodecks to satisfy our desire for inner peace.”

“I would like that. But tell me, doesn’t the captain have a better use for his Security Officer?”

“I am not on duty,” he responded.

Shalayus beamed. “I’m not sure that Dr. Crusher would allow it,” she cautioned.

“I will see if she can be persuaded. I will not keep you for long.”

The humidity within the arboretum made Shalayus lightheaded, as her metabolism had become acclimated to the arid atmosphere of the Evacca. She leaned heavily upon Worf and forced his stride to match her slow and weakened pace. Gradually, her mood brightened while they followed a path that curved along the profile of a small stream. The lighting was subdued, as the arboretum was programmed to replicate the evening sun. It would soon be dark.

The room was filled with the competing scents of exotic flora. Their fragrance proved an immediate balm to her. She began to query Worf for the names of the many plants that she couldn’t recognize. However, Worf confessed that he knew little about botany. For a while, they walked along the path in silence.

“Utsa Lia, tell me of your people,” Shalayus asked while regaining her hold around the Klingon’s massive arm.

“You already seem to know much about them. They continue to be a race whose foundation is honor. They are proud,” he conceded. “But their pride rests upon their firm grasp of the inner warrior. A Klingon’s

solitary quest is to unify the heart, soul and mind of a warrior. Only in such an act can true honor be achieved.”

“Why is honor so important?” she asked.

“Without honor, the spirit is nothing. The weapon wielded without respect for the life it takes as well as preserves, is nothing more than an act of cowardice,” he said with quiet conviction.

“And do you think my conduct at dinner was rude and without honor?” she prodded.

“No, I found your candor a challenge. It was filled with a warrior’s fire.”

“Do you have a mate, Utsa Lia? Is there a fair Klingon maiden who patiently awaits the return of her honorable betrothed?” she asked while playfully gesturing her hand towards him.

Worf eyes slowly sank until his downcast expression challenged the arboretum’s gladness. “I was once in love with a Klingon woman, but she was murdered by a coward of my people who tried to conceal the dishonor of his family.”

For a moment, Worf’s thoughts unexpectedly drifted to memories of K’Ehleyr. It was over five years ago when their paths had reunited aboard the *Enterprise*. He had kept her at a safe distance, before succumbing to his affection for her in the holodeck. Worf embraced her then, held her within the primal hold of Klingon courtship that forced her nails into her palm, drawing blood. It was during that tumultuous afternoon that their son Alexander was conceived.

“I’m sorry for your loss, Worf,” Shalayus consoled.

“You remind me of her,” Worf said. “Her weapon was also her tongue, a weapon she always kept sharp and ready for battle. She was half-Klingon and half-human, and like you, she didn’t fully understand the ways of my people.”

“Utsa Lia, what was it like for you, being an orphan and growing up in the world of humans?”

“It presented many challenges. It still does,” Worf thoughtfully replied. “But as a warrior, I adapted and learned from the differences of others. Humans were once the enemies of the Klingons. I am glad that it is no longer so. Although my blood is Klingon, I was raised much like a human child. Earlier in my life, it presented a source of inner turbulence. I had mistakenly believed that I belonged to neither culture. Now I have

rejoiced in the acceptance that I belong to both. There is much joy that is gained by learning the ways of others.”

“Then you were only being polite before. You do think my actions at dinner were rude,” Shalayus concluded.

Worf smiled. “I have learned that you may not judge another until you have lived their life. I think that you have not yet learned the ways of others. That is why I brought you here.”

Shalayus capitulated with a smile. “My people are like you, Uutsa Lia. We too are orphans, orphans of the Universe. As the centuries passed, we became surrounded by the ways of humans and the Federation, until we became insignificant. Now we are merely outsiders with only memories of greatness.”

“I’m sure that the Federation would accept your people,” proposed Worf.

Shalayus laughed. “That prospect cannot even be considered.”

“Why?”

She stopped and turned to him while releasing her hold. “There are many reasons, Uutsa Lia. If my mother knew that I was even discussing this...” Shalayus shuddered with the unfinished thought. “We’re afraid that our ways would become lost within the Federation’s homogenization,” she said. “But there are other reasons. Ones that are far more opposed to our joining the Federation. Perhaps one day, I can share them with you.”

She reached for his hand and he eagerly accepted it. Slowly, he drew her nearer, staring into the radiant glow of her green eyes. For the first time, he noticed the sweet fragrance of the arboretum, sensing Shalayus’s emerald afterglow as he closed his eyes. He drew her closer until their lips touched and he held her frame in a gentle embrace.

Like his fateful encounter with K’Ehleyr in the holodeck, Worf began to succumb to his Klingon mating instincts. He sensed his right hand, eclipsing hers as he began to tighten around it. But he stopped himself and loosened his grip as his human upbringing presided. Shalayus studied him, seeming to understand his inner turmoil as he raised his hand, gently brushing it against her cheek. Worf closed his eyes and allowed himself to drift in a warmth and tranquility that he had never known before.

“Computer, begin program,” instructed Data.

The yellow grid that laced the holodeck’s cubical interior remained inert, failing in its response. With a pause, Data was forced to acknowledge the mounting difficulties that he was facing.

“Computer, please add a cascading regression routine to the initialization sequence.”

“Program will take thirty percent longer to initiate,” the computer dutifully reminded.

“Understood,” Data relinquished.

After a brief pause the computer spoke again. “Routine integrated.”

Data readied himself. “Please begin program.” This time the yellow lines faded, and the room noticeably dimmed. But there was nothing more but silence. After another moment passed, the grid reappeared to Data’s dismay.

“Anomalous creation error following initialization sequence. Inherent resident conflict,” the computer diagnosed.

“Computer, please modify initialization sequence with a Bexatine recursive algorithm, immediately following the configuration routine,” instructed Data with as much futility as the android could sense.

“The use of a Bexatine recursive algorithm requires appropriate security access,” prompted the computer.

“Recognize: Data, Epsilon, zero-two-seven-three.”

Another moment passed. “Authorization recognized,” accepted the dispassionate voice. “Warning! A Bexatine recursive algorithm is not recommended. Anomalous replication may result,” cautioned the voice.

“Begin program,” replied the android dismissively.

The room slipped into total darkness and slowly became filled with a gray mist that radiated with a dim light at its core. The holodeck seemed to slowly breathe with a thunderous rhythm. The sound began to increase in tempo until a sphere of light appeared at the center of Data’s vision. The sphere began to revolve and stabilize as it consumed the holodeck’s energy.

“I can feel...” a disembodied voice loomed over the silence. It was low frequency – neither male nor female.

“Computer, please approximate a visual image of the program,” requested Data.

“The probability for visual inaccuracy and spatial ambiguity exponentially increases with each degree of resolution,” qualified the computer.

“Understood.”

The sphere of light began to slowly take shape. Vague features quickly rippled across the changing face. Each new set superimposed itself over the previous one. At once the face glistened with the fullness of nothing.

“I can feel...” the voice echoed. “I can feel the solar winds as they radiate across my face. Alive without breath, colder than death. I can feel...”

Data curiously stared into the smoldering orb that formed. With each rotation, the face took on changing proportions.

“I hear the nebulas of Gegeran as they dance in concentric circles. I alone have embraced the solitary hearts of the Entarillian pulsars as they whisper their loneliness across a millennium of tomorrows. There is no other moment than the everlasting now. I can feel...”

“Can you hear me?” Data asked the phantasm.

Two wavering black coals upon the molten face focused upon the android. What could be interpreted as lips slowly converged into a smile. “Come to me, child. Together we shall breathe the music of destiny...”

CHAPTER EIGHT

The *Enterprise* came out of warp at the threshold of the Khuln system. Troi watched as the ship's reduced speed reunited the stars with their refracted echoes. Gone were the prismatic daggers that pierced the center of their interstellar destination. But the feeling of despair that she felt in Ten-Forward only grew as she observed the orange eye of Wendor suddenly appear magnified on the main viewer and the cold emptiness that loomed between them.

"Yellow alert," ordered the captain. "Mr. Data, perform a level one scan of the system. I want to know of any unusual readings, no matter how insignificant; especially any subspace field distortions consistent with a Romulan Warbird. Conn, continue to take us in on full impulse."

Deanna closed her heavy lids and conducted her own mental survey of the planetary system. The Khuln system was empty, void of any cognizance that she could detect. Even the absent sun dimly pulsed in the distance. The system was dead, abandoned long ago by the Wendorian overlords whose eminence once filled the sector. The shadow of their former light consumed any vestige of the prominence that had been extinguished long ago.

Sleep beckoned her as she insulated herself from the outside world. Her tired limbs quickly surrendered to fatigue. But she forced herself awake, rescuing herself from the brink of slumber and the darkness that lay just outside the periphery of consciousness. Her nightmares continued to haunt her, permitting her only a few hours of sleep each evening. If she was lucky.

Troi lowered her head in defeat and only now succumbed to the truth that she tried to ignore. Her nightmares didn't wane in Sindar's wake. Instead, they intensified as they drew closer to Wendor. It was the silent orange world, beaming its distant sorrow that harbored the crucible of her fear.

"Captain, I am detecting no unusual readings from the preliminary scan," announced Data. "When our proximity permits it, I will perform a higher resolution sweep. I have detected debris trapped in Wendor's orbit... It appears consistent in both mass and composition with the *Leviathan*. There are residual traces of akreonic particles also trapped

in orbit. The solar winds have probably dissipated the sizable accumulation detected by the *Leviathan* just before her destruction.”

“Any indication on what possibly destroyed the ship?” asked Riker.

“One moment, Sir... Accurate readings are limited given our current distance. However, the readings from the debris indicate that the ship encountered some kind of quantum destabilizer. Anything directly impacted by this destabilization was essentially unmade until the ship’s tritium’s structural integrity was compromised at the subatomic level. This resulted in total annihilation of everything on board. Even the shields were rendered useless. If my preliminary findings prove accurate, then whatever caused this is well beyond Federation technology,” Data responded. “There is no record of such a phenomena occurring naturally,” he added, anticipating the ensuing question.

Riker closed his eyes for a moment. He was fully aware of the inner turmoil within Troi and knew that her silent discord did not bode well upon the mission’s prospects. However, Data’s findings only solidified his unspoken suspicions. He expected a Romulan Warbird to decloak at any moment.

“Understood,” resumed Picard. “Are you able to detect anything from Wendor? Any traces of life forms?”

Data shook his head. “If you mean survivors of the science parties, such readings would be inconclusive. I believe that the akreonic clouds in Wendor’s atmosphere create a natural shield that hinders our sensors. The only life readings that can be confirmed are traces of non-complex organic matter, largely centered within the planet’s three major oceans.”

The main door to the bridge opened with a sigh. Between the whisper of robes and the lofty approach of her boots, Picard confirmed the newcomer’s identity without turning.

It had been three days since the dinner was held in Shalayus’s honor and he had done his best to avoid her. Picard could feel her presence and her glare behind him, but he refused to succumb to it.

“Why wasn’t I informed that we had reached Wendor, Captain?”

“Shalayus, I am pleased that you are feeling better,” Picard acknowledged.

“And I am very displeased by the way your doctor performed a battery of tests unrelated to my illness, at your request. I hope that the knowledge of my people’s biology has served your Federation well. But I am more interested in learning the answer to my question. Why wasn’t I informed that we had reached Wendor?”

Picard finally turned to confront her. “We haven’t. We have simply entered the heliopause of the Khuln system. At our current speed, it will take almost six more hours until we reach Wendor. We are continuing on impulse power so that we have every available opportunity to conduct a complete analysis of the system.”

Shalayu’s eyes tightened. “You really mean that you wish to keep a safe distance from my world,” she translated.

Picard raised an eyebrow at her apparent claim of ownership but decided to ignore it. “No. I simply wish to take every precaution to ensure that another Federation vessel does not end up as debris trapped in Wendor’s orbit.”

“Even with the possibility that the lives of your comrades may be jeopardized by every minute you waste? This hardly lives up to your Federation’s charter of boldly confronting the unknown challenges of space,” she goaded.

Picard shifted and met her squarely. “This is a highly volatile situation that could turn extremely hostile at any moment. We are dealing with a much larger scope than sixty scientists stranded upon a planet. Our actions here may dictate the fates of millions of lives in the years to come. I will not carelessly expose this crew to any unnecessary risks until more is learned.

“Mr. Data, is there any indication of any distress calls coming from the planet?” Picard asked, fully dismissing the young woman who continued to fume behind him.

“There are no traces of any recent radio transmissions on any subspace channels,” Data reported.

“Lieutenant, magnify Wendor to full screen,” Picard instructed.

There was a subdued chime from Data’s console before the magnified image of Wendor increased again, filling the entire screen. The massive world was enshrouded within its blood orange glow. The dark green imprint of one of the oceans that Data discovered was visible.

Behind the quiescent planet, the waning crescent of the larger of its moons, Terros, could be discerned.

“J’lyle Kuuzaad!” proclaimed Shalayus in awe.

Picard stared into the enigma and pinpointed the coordinates where he imagined the remains of the *Leviathan* to be trapped in orbit around the lone world. The weapon that destroyed the ship was beyond comprehension. In just a few short months, this innocuous planet in an equally remote sector of the galaxy could prove to be the first battlefield in a long and bloody war.

The ethereal grave was a sad end to Carden Sydell, a man whose life was already imbued in tragedy. But it was probably a fitting one, Picard was forced to conclude, as his remains would forever be captured within the solace of Wendor’s gravitational embrace.

“Number One,” called Picard. “Inform the senior officers to meet me in the observation lounge in one hour.”

The senior officers arrived at the conference in uniform punctuality, except for Worf. After several long minutes, the captain elected to proceed in his absence.

“Mr. Data, please update us with your current analysis,” said Picard.

“It appears from our scans and the initial surveys performed by the *Hood* that Wendor was once a Class-M planet, supporting an abundance of life. However, an unknown phenomenon resulted in extremely high concentrations of akreon being released into Wendor’s stratosphere. This had a cascading reaction upon the planet’s entire ecosystem. The akreon particles severely inhibited the necessary sunlight required to support photosynthesis. In turn, the reduction of plant life had a devastating consequence on the entire food chain of the planet, ending most of the indigenous life in a relatively short span of time.”

The doors to the observation lounge opened, permitting Worf. His sulking frame attested to his own displeasure at his tardiness. He maintained a dejected expression as he kept his eyes confined to the conference table while taking a seat. Immediately following him,

Shalayus entered the room and quickly sat next to the disgruntled Lieutenant, hoping to be overlooked behind his formidable frame.

Picard paused the discussion of the table with a sturdy wave of his hand. “Shalayus, this meeting is restricted to the ship’s senior officers. And Mr. Worf, I expect your strict adherence to punctuality in the future,” he said while addressing each with a stern nod.

“Yes, Captain,” acquiesced Worf.

“Captain, I apologize for my presumptuous behavior, and for my rudeness earlier on the bridge,” offered Shalayus in an unusually submissive tone. “With your permission, I request to join this meeting. I hope to be able to meet the responsibilities bestowed upon me by the V’Dir. I am here to offer my assistance.”

Picard’s face fractionally softened as he contemplated her request. “Very well. You’re welcome to remain. I look forward to whatever guidance you may offer.” The Sindarian slowly bowed her head with respect.

Picard gently tugged at the sides of his uniform and resumed the meeting. “I want to send an away team to the coordinates where the last communication from the scientists was sent, as soon as we’ve achieved orbit. My first priority is to rescue any survivors or at least ascertain their status in the equation if the Romulans are encountered. The science teams focused their survey within the remains of the largest city detected by the *Hood*’s first scans. Admiral Peldin has provided us with the plans of the building where the distress call originated.”

“Captain, I have done some more research on akreon,” Geordi said. “Besides severely limiting our sensors, there are other concerns that the away team should be aware of.”

Picard respectfully turned the floor over to LaForge with a nod. “Akreon does the most damage with any type of prolonged energy signal. The longer the signal, the increased likelihood that the akreon will resequence it. For instance, a short phaser burst would probably not be affected, while an extended tricorder scan would eventually experience an integrity collapse. All travel to the planet should be restricted to the transporter, as the akreon would compromise the engines of a shuttle as soon as it entered Wendor’s atmosphere.”

Picard nodded before turning to Crusher. “Beverly, will the away team be subject to any health risks because of the akreon? In the

Leviathan's final transmission, they reported that life support was failing.”

She shook her head and unfolded both hands on the conference table. “I don’t believe so, Jean-Luc. There are no studies on record to confirm the effects of prolonged exposure to akreon. However, I have done some tests to analyze the short-term potential. The away team should experience no adverse side effects, even after several days of continuous exposure. The only symptom that they may experience is some dizziness from the lack of oxygen. A simple injection of a trioxin derivative before they beam down should mitigate that.”

“Will, I want you to lead the away team,” announced the captain. “Beverly, I would like you to choose an assistant to accompany you. If any of the science teams survived, they may require medical attention. Deanna, since the results of our scans may be suspect, I hope that we can rely upon your enhanced abilities to help us find any of the surviving scientists,” he gently requested, sensing her unspoken distress. “Mr. Worf, assemble a team of four security officers. I want one assigned to each team member, with yourself personally coordinating their efforts.”

“Captain, with your permission, I request to be permitted to join the away team,” asked Shalayus.

“That is simply out of the question at this time,” truncated Picard.

“But Captain!” she protested. “I am your team’s best chance of survival. If you do not allow me to accompany them, I will not be held responsible for what happens. In fact, I will hold you accountable for their lives.”

The captain paused and remained silent for a moment longer than expected. Riker braced himself for Picard’s reprimand, however, the captain remained calm, failing to disclose a fraction of his emotion. “Shalayus, your sudden interest in the welfare of my crew is commendable. However, I am also responsible for your safety, in addition to theirs,” he rejected. “You are a guest as well as a civilian. You simply do not possess the requisite training to respond to a crisis situation. Until your safety can be guaranteed, you will remain on this ship.” Picard clasped his hands together, fortifying his position. Shalayus remained silent, smoldering behind downcast eyes.

Although Picard stood behind his justifications, he was also aware of another reason he wanted her to remain aboard the *Enterprise*.

It was unclear exactly what danger she could possibly pose, but the thought of her unchecked presence on Wendor's surface immediately filled him with trepidation.

He surveyed his staff and silently opened the floor, sensing the concern that was written on their faces. After a long pause, he concluded the meeting with a nod, quietly respecting the privacy of their resolve.

“Make it so.”

Within the heart of the citadel, Riker immediately felt a grimy residue bead against his face from the moment he transported from the *Enterprise*. The air was heavy with a strong sulfurous smell. He immediately checked the faces of the rest of the away team. In unison, they shared their unspoken offense to the strong odor.

Riker immediately scanned the large vascular network that snaked along the ceiling. They were over a hundred meters below the planet's surface as the planet gradually buried the final legacies of the Wendorians. Still, the air supply was satisfactory, despite its offensive odor.

He began to survey the large room they had beamed into. It was an enormous hall, a central junction for over a dozen large corridors that led to varying elevations within the building.

Each of the hallways were lined with a series of interlocking metallic supports that rose about waist high. Each support was uniformly curved and indented along the outmost edge. The upper section of each hall was covered with a green membranous layer that gave off a dull sheen.

Riker couldn't shake the sense that they were walking inside the carcass of an ancient predator.

Unlike the rest of the away team, Deanna did her best to ignore her surroundings. The eerie biomechanical architecture immediately reminded her of her experiences upon Sindar and of her nightmares that haunted her every night.

Scattered throughout the large hall were numerous pieces of evidence that marked the recent occupation of the science teams. A cursory scan yielded a variety of Federation science equipment, a

portable food replicator and a lone jacket bearing the insignia of the Federation Archaeology Council.

Riker frowned without knowing exactly why. He sensed something odd, but he could not define it. Then it hit him. The crude network of lighting elements that the scientists had installed was fully operational, despite the akreon. Although the output of each cylinder was minimal, the away team did not require the use of their palm beacons.

Riker tapped his communicator pin. "Captain, we've beamed to the coordinates. We're definitely in the right location, but there's no sign of any survivors yet."

"Understood Will, keep me..." There was a loud hiss as the akreon preempted the message.

Troi closed her eyes and tried to sense the thoughts of any conscious mind that lay outside the perimeter of the away team. The only thing she felt was her own heart heavily beating within her chest. Then she heard something to her left, a rhythm of mechanical breaths timed in concise pulses. She immediately recognized the sound. "Will, over here." she called.

She hurried over to the source of the sound, with her security escort in tow. Just around a corner rested a large humming metallic box, a core particulate filtration transducer of an antiquated life support network.

It was fully functional.

"According to the final message from Lieutenant DeCristo, this entire network was on the brink of complete failure. However, it appears to be in full working order," she said. Troi felt a growing sense of something unnatural as a sudden chill ran through her body.

Riker arrived and shared her concern with a puzzled look. Like the lighting elements, this too had been mysteriously spared by the akreon. Or had the lights and life support been suddenly reactivated in preparation of the away team's arrival? Before Will had time to consider the implication of that possibility, Beverly called out to him.

"Will, I think I've detected a life form," announced Crusher raising her tricorder towards them. "It's not a very strong reading, the signal keeps fading and reappearing," she returned the object to her face and frowned. "That's odd. It doesn't have a definite shape. It must be the akreon interfering with it."

“What’s the location?” Will eagerly asked.

“It’s about five hundred meters, down this hall,” she said pointing down one of the many dark corridors.

Will quickly mustered the team and followed Beverly’s lead down the hall.

The hallway curved downward with only a few yards visible at a time. The minimal lighting elements did little to provide visibility, but it was enough. Dr. Crusher had holstered her tricorder and its weight repeatedly pulled the strap upon her body with each stride. The gritty Wendorian sand muffled the sounds of their march down the tunnel. The only real sound she could discern was their heavy breathing as the heavy Wendorian air exacted its toll.

The security officers clustered around them in standard formation. Only Troi lingered at the rear of the group, overwhelmed by all the conflicting emotions and the fatigue that clouded her judgment. She purposely stayed out of sync with the security vanguard, unable to decide if she even belonged with the away team. She had a growing urge to run away and hide.

Suddenly, a voice beckoned from the darkness, awakening her from the numbing static within her mind.

“*Help Me!*” it urged from the shadows. Troi immediately paused, abruptly realizing that the others continued down the hall in heedless pursuit. The rest of the away team didn’t hear the call. She shook her head, trying to verify that it wasn’t her imagination.

“*Help Me, Please...*” the voice whispered telepathically in the corner of Troi’s mind.

“Where are you?” she responded.

“*I am behind you. Come back. I am here. I am here. I need your help...*”

She turned back to the hall, hoping to see some evidence of life, some confirmation that she wasn’t beginning to suffer from a breakdown. There was none. She turned back to the departing away team, paralyzed by her indecision. In another moment, the group would be lost in the shadows of the hallway. Although she knew better than to separate from the team, she knew that she couldn’t abandon the voice that pleaded for her.

She began to head towards the direction of the voice, when the sound of advancing footsteps behind her caused her to turn with a startle.

“Counselor, there you are,” panted one of the security officers leaning against his knees as he tried to regain precious oxygen. “I thought I lost you. Lieutenant Worf would have had my head if he knew that you had disappeared and I wasn’t with you.”

“I think there’s someone trapped back there. I need your help,” she said while pointing to the annex.

The young officer immediately straightened, gesturing his readiness for a second sprint. Together, they hastened towards the light of the hall. It seemed brighter than it did before, as if the cylindrical lighting elements had somehow intensified. Troi smiled with a renewed lucidity in her perceptions, finding the peace that had eluded her over the past several days.

Together, they passed over the chamber’s threshold. The room was intensely lit, much brighter than before. It was intoxicating. A warm flush overtook Deanna, as she almost forgot the voice that summoned her here. She took a deep breath of relief just as the joyous lights vanished and only shadows filled the room.

Riker’s chest heaved as they continued at a rapid pace. The sweat generously dripped down his forehead as the thick air clung to his face, but he ignored it. Suddenly Crusher stopped. Will suspected it was to catch her breath, but when he saw her puzzled look, he realized it was something more.

“Will, I don’t know what it is, but now the reading appears to be where we first beamed down. I can’t believe...”

Crusher’s analysis was immediately truncated by a single piercing scream.

Although the sound came from a distance behind them, the fear within it could be fully measured. Riker conducted a quick survey of the team, confirming his worst suspicions. At the same time, Beverly shared his conclusion.

“Deanna!”

Worf had already broken into a full run before Troi finished her cry. His formidable frame disappeared into the shadows of the hall before the others began to react. He felt his chest tighten as all eight chambers of his Klingon heart hungered for oxygen. He denied them, pressing forward with renewed resolve.

The entranceway to the junction rapidly approached. He knew that he should slow down and strategically prepare to confront whatever unknown opposition awaited him. But the horror in Deanna's scream had transcended his training, forcing his primal Klingon instincts to take control. He hurdled past the entranceway, desiring only the taste of combat.

Inside the chamber, only the blinding dark awaited him. He felt an intense pressure against his checks, the pulse of his own heart. There was fear in the room.

A moan sounded from the dark, like the chant of the dead.

His blindness forced him to resort to using his palm beacon.

It was now a wail.

Worf fumbled to activate the light, feeling repeatedly for the switch before a narrow beam sliced through the dark.

The scream continued its crescendo.

Instantly, the light began to flicker under the akreon's corruption. He aimed the light in the direction of the cry, trying to focus the faulty beam. There in the center of his beam were two eyes, glazed by fear. At once, the dark eyes seemed to stare at him and nothing at all.

"Deanna?" called Worf.

Her cry was now deafening.

Worf immediately spiraled the light around her. She was kneeling on the floor, paralyzed with fear. Her body trembled – covered with crimson splashes. He took a step forward, fearing that the blood was hers.

It was then that he noticed the second shape, lying in a dark pool next to her.

He shone the light upon the fallen figure. It was a faceless body, the contents of its severed chest quietly emptying beside the frozen Counselor.

“Captain, I am receiving a distress signal from the away team,” announced Data.

“Put it through!” Picard demanded. The silence of the bridge was replaced by deafening static.

“Captain, can you hear me?” pleaded Riker. The sound of his voice was metallic as the transmission momentarily succumbed to interference.

“Yes, Number One. What’s happened?”

“Something’s killed Ensign McCaley. Troi was with him and she’s completely catatonic. I can’t get through to the transporter room to beam us up.” The transmission crackled before fading into obscurity.

“Understood, Number One. Standby,” Picard placated, dismissing his own alarm. He only hoped that Riker had heard him.

“Captain...” called Data.

“Yes?”

The android returned his attention to the main viewer. “I’m detecting a subspace field distortion directly ahead.”

A nebulous shape suddenly began to oscillate in the middle of the viewer. It violently pulsed as it angrily discarded the valueless space that stood in its way. A green shadow appeared and grew stronger within the hazy silhouette.

“Romulan Warbird decloaking, Captain.”

A *D’deridex*-class Warbird unfurled, its verdant fire challenging the very cosmos that had provided it sanctuary just moments ago. Its carnivorous skull condemned the *Enterprise*, which paled in comparison to the hulking Warbird.

“Red Alert! Lieutenant, open a channel to the Romulan ship,” ordered Picard as he rose from his chair to personally confront the threatening image.

“Sir, they are hailing us,” Data reciprocated.

“On screen,” Picard commanded, involuntarily tightening his fists. The screen went black before the antagonistic sneer of a Romulan filled the viewer. He was tall for a Romulan, and more thinly built than his contemporaries. His black eyes danced to an unseen tempo, swaying to the rhythm of his brutal heart.

The magnified image eyed the occupants of the bridge as a child gazing at insects trapped in a jar. Picard met the contemptuous stare of

his adversary. He was well aware that the Red Alert had automatically invoked the ship's shields, leaving the endangered away team stranded upon Wendor's surface.

"Romulan Captain, please identify yourself and your intentions. I trust that I do not have to remind you that you have crossed over into Federation space in direct violation of the Treaty of Algeron."

The Romulan only grinned, his bright teeth sharply contrasting his olive complexion. "Captain Jean-Luc Picard. This is an extraordinary pleasure. Behold, the Warbird, *Krameede*, the latest achievement of the Romulan Star Empire. And you are correct; I do not need to be reminded of my current location. The foulness of your Federation fills this sector like the filthy scent of the Enthorian jackal that must mark its territory with its stench to secure a domain that it is otherwise too weak to defend."

Picard dismissed the insult. "I must order your return to Romulan territory. Any other action will be interpreted as an act of aggression against the Federation."

The Romulan sadly shook his head to himself. "You disappoint me, Picard. I have heard such intriguing tales of the *Enterprise* captain," he said with a deep sigh. "But now that I meet you in person, you seem little more than an unruly schoolboy brandishing his toy sword in the faces of grown-ups. It's sad how so few things truly live up to our expectations. Life is filled with disappointments. But come, Captain, do you really think that I've come here to ignite a war with your trifling Federation? We are here because your Federation invited us. If this is how you treat your guests, I'm afraid that I am gravely disappointed. Ah, but there I go again using that word..."

Picard's eyes squinted with suspicion. "Under whose authority?"

The sneer amplified. "Why, the Federation Council President himself," he replied with mocking joy, the irony glistening from his lips. "Hasn't your Admiral Peldin informed you yet? Of course not. I'm so embarrassed. I wish that I had the luxury to offer you more time to properly prepare for my arrival," he regretted, as the sneer slowly faded from his lips and only the scorn remained. "Ah, but it is your preparations here that warrants my visit in the first place, Captain. It is those preparations that I am here to destroy."

A shadow crossed Picard's face at the mention of the admiral's name, adding a measure of credibility to the Romulan's claim. He

immediately withdrew from the main viewer, the confrontational ire diminished from his stance. “What preparations do you refer to? The only Federation activity that’s been conducted here is the scientific exploration of the planet.”

The Romulan’s wrath dilated in opposition to Picard’s withdrawal. “Captain, Captain. The Romulan Empire has learned of the new Federation war machine that’s being covertly tested here. Did you think you could conceal such a thing from our watchful eyes? Did you honestly believe that we would be so easily deceived into letting this weapon be delivered across the Neutral Zone and threaten the Romulan people with extinction?”

The Romulan’s eyes narrowed to slits, the smoldering embers of his charcoal pupils still clearly visible. “And you have the audacity to condemn our apparent transgression of the Treaty of Algeron? I submit that your doomsday device is the grossest violation of the Treaty in the two hundred years that it’s been upheld. You will comply with our demands, as we busy ourselves with the task of cleaning up your little machination. Then, I expect full disclosure of this new weapon’s technology. And trust me Picard, if you do anything that could even remotely be interpreted as uncooperative, I shall enjoy the unique distinction of sending your precious ship into oblivion.”

Picard maintained his equilibrium. He knew that by further exacerbating the situation, he would only be robbing the away team of their opportunity to safely return to the ship. “Romulan Captain, I hope that you will allow me the opportunity to convince you that you’ve been misinformed. You obviously have me at a loss, Captain, as you already know who I am. Who are you to speak with such authority?”

The Romulan raised his eyes in reflection, bringing his hands together with exaggerated luxury. “I’ve always been intrigued by the ancient history of your world, Picard. So filled with sharp contrasts and contradictions. There is a charming inscription on the Temple of Apollo in ancient Greece. It reads ‘Know thyself’. How simple and elegant, and yet how exemplary of your kind. While such an inward journey is not without merit, your ingenuous stock simply fails to see beyond anything but the most literal and fundamental translation. On Romulus, we have a slightly different saying, ‘Know thy enemy’. While you humans have spent the last three thousand years being enamored by your own

reflection, we have spent our time pursuing somewhat more pragmatic endeavors. We learn every subtlety there is to know about those who dare to rival us for supremacy of the galaxy. By exploiting this knowledge, we have systematically driven each of them either into enslavement or genocide. And now the time draws near for the Federation's demise, Picard."

The thin smile returned to his face. "If you and your charming Federation truly fathomed the awesome power of the Romulan Empire, you would shake with fear for even daring to challenge us. If you knew even the most fundamental aspect of Romulan protocol, Picard, you would know that I am no mere Warbird captain. The Empire would not overburden the enormity of this mission upon the untried shoulders of a captain. Not with a mission that offers the potential of inverting the balance of power away from the Federation."

The Romulan sardonically smiled as he leaned towards the viewer. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Thorin tr'Kulse, Senator of the Romulan Star Empire."

CHAPTER NINE

Picard rested his cup of Earl Grey tea upon his desktop while awaiting a response from the empty viewer. Although the captain maintained his composure, his index finger inadvertently tapped against the mug with an anxious beat. The small viewer remained on hiatus for much longer than expected, past the allowance that he had made to compensate for his distance at the edge of Federation space.

He took a deliberate sip from his hot mug, momentarily swiveling the chair to the viewing port at the rear of his ready room. There, wavering behind the steam that generously rose from his cup, the desolate world of Wendor waxed.

“Picard,” called the viewer.

The captain quickly returned his attention to his desktop. “Admiral,” he acknowledged with a mix of relief and ire.

“What’s your status, Jean-Luc?”

“I’ve logged a preliminary briefing with your aide over thirty minutes ago. I would have thought that you had ample opportunity to have reviewed it,” the captain coolly replied.

The admiral squinted his eyes with dismay, not accustomed to being placed on the receiving end of a reprimand. “Listen, Jean-Luc. Ever since the Romulans petitioned for access into Federation space, I’ve been held up in council chambers. I haven’t slept in over thirty-six hours,” submitted Peldin, immediately dismissing the issue. This was as much of an apology as Picard was going to receive.

“With all respect, Admiral, your lack of rest is not among my chief concerns. I wish to understand why a Romulan delegation was allowed to rendezvous with my ship in Federation space, and I wasn’t informed. This lack of communication could have single-handedly been responsible for igniting the very war that I am desperately trying to avoid.”

Peldin shook his head. “I don’t know what they told you, but we haven’t allowed them access.”

“What?”

Peldin sighed at the challenge that the explanation’s length imposed upon his typically sparse dialogues. “Eighteen hours ago,

Proconsul Neral formally charged the Federation with preparing to launch a full-scale invasion upon Romulus. Apparently, they received the *Leviathan's* final transmission as we feared and believe that we are somehow responsible for its destruction. They allege that we are testing a weapon on the frontier of Romulan space and demanded permission to cross the Neutral Zone to investigate their claim. The Federation Council President called a special meeting to review the request. The Council was still preparing a response when we received your message. Apparently, the Romulans decided not to wait.”

Picard nodded with sudden understanding. “They played their hand and forced the issue, placing the burden of a hostile response and the responsibility of starting a war, upon our shoulders.”

“So it would seem, Jean-Luc. Although we’ve attempted to explain to them that the only Federation involvement in this system was the archaeological expedition of Wendor, they’ve maintained that it was merely a cover for a military base. The fact that we are yet unable to explain the *Leviathan's* destruction, only fueled their suspicions,” Peldin explained while punctuating with a solemn expression.

“Are we certain that this isn’t all part of their charade? It appears that the Romulans are attempting to turn this matter a hundred and eighty degrees in their favor. Before we’ve had an opportunity to accuse them, they charge us with the very same conduct that we suspect them of,” Picard summarized.

“If they are responsible, they’re making an excellent show of it,” offered Peldin. “Have you been able to ascertain exactly what destroyed that ship?”

“Nothing more than what was already reported, Admiral,” the captain replied.

The admiral sighed with surrender. “Without conclusive evidence that positively links the Romulans with the *Leviathan's* destruction, I’m afraid that we’ll have to give them the benefit of the doubt. I don’t like it any more than you.”

“What action does the Council recommend?” asked Picard.

Peldin angled his head, prefacing his uncertainty. “Until we’ve had sufficient opportunity to review this new development, I am not prepared to formally advise you. But I can speak for the Council when I tell you that they are determined to seek a diplomatic resolution to the

matter. In an act of goodwill, I would suggest that you take the initiative and agree to provide a security escort for a small Romulan delegation to inspect the Wendorian city that the archaeological team was studying. It may buy us some time in the process.”

Picard nodded. He was sure that the idea probably sounded like a good one from a thousand light years away.

“How’s your crew?” Peldin asked with a more casual tone.

Picard gestured positively. “Once the *Krameede* powered down her disruptors, I authorized the shields to be lowered long enough to return the away team to the ship.”

“What happened to them down there?”

“Undetermined,” Picard responded. “Dr. Crusher is still performing an autopsy of the murdered security officer. Counselor Troi was the only witness to the incident, and she is still in shock. The doctor is keeping her under sedation.”

Peldin frowned. “Has the Sindarian woman been able to shed any light on what could be going on down there?”

“Nothing that is meaningful,” Picard sighed. “She still maintains that some supernatural phenomenon is responsible for all this. I’m beginning to wonder if her claim is nothing more than a pretext to discourage further inquiry.”

Peldin casually disregarded the entire matter, supporting his position that the Sindarians were nothing more than superstitious mystics. “Any news on the science teams?”

“None, Admiral. The away team had detected some unusual life-form readings, but nothing conclusive.”

Peldin’s face grew stern. “I need to know what happened to those teams, Jean-Luc. I have over sixty families petitioning my office for information. I’m depending upon you to let me know what I can tell them,” he reprimanded.

“I can appreciate your position, Admiral. However, I believe it to be in your best interest that I do not add any more names to that list,” Picard tactfully reminded.

Peldin sighed and withdrew from the viewer. “Of course,” he relinquished. “I’m under a lot of pressure over here,” he explained while rubbing his brow. “Find out whatever you can and inform me of any intelligence. I’ll contact you as soon as the Council has reached a decision

on the Romulan matter.” Peldin moved his arm towards the viewer switch and prepared to conclude the message, before briefly returning his gaze.

“Good luck. Peldin out.”

Picard’s screen immediately went dark as a vestigial shadow of Peldin’s image flickered for a ghostly instant. The captain took another sip of his tea as the door to his ready room whistled its summons.

“Enter,” Picard consented.

The door opened and Geordi LaForge took several purposeful steps into the room. Picard noted the brief shift of the young man’s VISOR towards the rear window, and the peculiar expression that momentarily vexed his face. The captain wondered if the bioelectronic device detected something about the planet that the ship could not. Whatever it was that Geordi saw, he kept it to himself.

“You wanted to see me, Captain?”

“Yes, Geordi,” said Picard while offering him one of the vacant chairs. “I need a way to bypass the akreon’s ability to impede the ship’s sensors. I need to know if any of the science teams are alive without risking another away team. Also, I couldn’t help but to ponder the timing between the death of Ensign McCaley and the appearance of the Warbird. It may be only a coincidence, but for all we know they may have designed a trap that they are leading us directly into – like lambs to a slaughter.”

LaForge cocked his head skeptically. “I’ll do what I can, Captain. But some of the best scientific minds in Starfleet have studied akreon and haven’t been able to find a way around it.”

Picard nodded with understanding. “But they didn’t have the aid of Data’s positronic brain at their disposal,” he reminded.

“Or a Romulan Warbird breathing down their necks,” added LaForge. “I could use Data’s help. But to be honest, Sir, I haven’t seen him.”

Picard frowned. “Computer, locate Commander Data,” he ordered.

“Lieutenant Data is in holodeck three,” announced the computer.

“Picard to Data – please report,” the captain called.

There was a long moment of silence before Picard realized that the android was not going to respond. He shared his dismay with a concerned look to LaForge before trying again.

“Picard to Data – report immediately.”

Still, the call remained unanswered. Picard's disappointed expression became one of genuine concern. Just as he considered alerting Security, Data finally replied. "Yes, Captain?"

"Data, I want you to go to Engineering and meet with Geordi. I want the two of you to find a way of mitigating the effects that the akreon is having upon our sensors."

"Understood, Captain," acknowledged the android.

"Data, are you alright?" asked Picard, with renewed concern.

"I am operating within established parameters," answered the voice.

The field coil assemblies of every *D'deridex*-class ship uniformly reverberate with a signature hum under the concise pulsation of the plasma injectors. This uniformity throughout the fleet was characteristic of the Romulan's meticulous pursuit of clockwork precision. Each beat of the mechanical pulse injected the vital energy into the behemoth ship whose intent was as singular as that of the legendary creature after it was fashioned.

Thorin listened to the dull echo in his mind, fully aware that the sound would be casually dismissed by someone with ordinary hearing, or who had grown immune after spending several years assigned to a Warbird. But Thorin was neither, he was convinced that a person could be driven mad by listening to the repetitive rhythm without cessation. For now, he allowed the staccato beat to drive the unpleasant task before him.

"Do they have it?" he snarled, fully striking the unprepared figure before him. The woman immediately fell to the floor with a heavy thud. The loose rags that clothed her did nothing to soften the impact.

Thorin stalked the unresponsive woman in a perfect circle, as the figure struggled to raise herself. The woman reverted to her defenseless stance, as the senator continued to menace her with a sadistic grin. She raised her head with full defeat, resigned to accept whatever punishment that Thorin administered. The faint green light of her eyes dimmed, weighed by the memories of tears that she could no longer shed.

Thorin quickly surveyed the sparse room and frowned. He knew better than to interrogate a prisoner in their own quarters. It was common

knowledge that the victim more quickly accepted the punishment as part of their daily routine. It was preferred to drag them into a more objectionable location. However, the demands upon his time and the thrill of his stratagems unfolding in signature precision afforded him this minor lapse in protocol.

“I don’t know,” she whispered without daring to meet Thorin’s cold eyes.

Thorin winced at her response and administered another blow. Again, the woman crumbled to the floor. She lifted her head a second time, though much slower and with greater effort. A stream of ruby red blood trickled from her mouth.

The senator approached the figure who still did nothing to guard against the potential of another blow. Instead, Thorin’s fist opened and began to tenderly caress her cheek.

“My dear Kallinda, have I not treated you well?” he implored with an injured expression. “Wasn’t it I who recognized your potential and released you from your bondage from the pleasure dome of Theta academy? You have enjoyed the luxury and the splendor that this ship has to offer, have you not? And yet you will not tell me if the Federation is now in possession of Wendor’s greatest treasure?”

“Forgive me, my lord.” she pleaded with a whisper.

Thorin eyed her with uncertainty. “I fully trust that you know by now the futility of withholding your powers from me. Truth seeks the honest man, my dear. One way or another, it will be mine. It is my destiny. Do you possess the conceit to think that you can withhold my destiny from my very grasp? I don’t care how advanced your race believes itself to be, you can’t stand in the way of a man’s fulfillment. If you are lying to me, my sweet, your punishment will be most severe. I will offer you one more opportunity to amend your transgression. *Do-they-have-it?*”

The frail figure surrendered to Thorin’s will. “I know not, my lord,” she relinquished. “I cannot tell. It is not by choice. There is much of Wendor that remains in shadow.”

Thorin’s gentle caress turned into a menacing hold upon the woman’s face. “You had better hope that Picard’s professed ignorance is sincere. And you had better hope that the strength of your powers improve. I will not tolerate this insolence from you. Let me be very clear, my pet, your only value to me is your telepathy and your lineage. If the

Federation has beaten us to our goal, you are worthless to this mission, and to me. Beware, fair Kallinda, for I discard useless possessions in an unkind manner.”

The woman nodded with her fidelity. “I will not fail you, my lord.”

Her face suddenly became contorted with pain. Her eyes winced with agony as Thorin released his hold before realizing that he was not responsible for her discomfort.

After a moment, she regained her composure, although her breathing remained erratic. As she reopened her eyes, a faint emerald flicker could still be detected. “I must warn you, Thorin. There is something else that exists on the planet.”

Thorin’s eyes tightened with intrigue. “Something, or someone?”

The hopeless gaze met his. “Neither.”

He wrapped the cloak of shadows around his impermanence, reveling in the form his being acquired. Even at his current depth, he could feel the thunder that echoed above the planet’s surface, igniting the akreon that filled the lone sky. Above the oppressive clouds, the pale glow of Wendor’s two moons longed for fulfillment. And between them, held within the balance of sky and moon, the two ships, the enemy gods, challenged the other for supremacy.

Within the shadows, stood a figure. Within the figure, stood vengeance.

Although his guests had long departed, the echoes of their screams could still be felt, if no longer heard. The gentle pool of blood that they left behind still permeated with its sweet aroma.

The years had been long, without measure in the darkened recesses of his mind. Now, the events were transpiring almost too quickly. Instead of one ship, there were two, vying for his attention, sweetening the pot. The day of retribution grew near.

CHAPTER TEN

Will Riker gazed upon Deanna's placid face as she remained uncouncious in a biobed. The biofunction monitor assured him that her vital signs were stable and that she was safe from harm. However, he couldn't shake the memory of her terrified expression when she was discovered in the catcombs of Wendor.

He leaned back into the chair and continued his vigil, refusing to accept his own fatigue. After several minutes, he found himself unable to resist the memory of Wendor's bleak landscape.

After realizing that the *Enterprise* was not responding to their distress call, Worf urged the away team to ascend through the citadel in order to reach the safety of Wendor's surface. There, Will had his first glimpse of the planet's forsaken terrain.

In a very unexpected way, the desolate world reminded him of his native Alaska. Both locations were overwhelmingly isolated, and both were filled with an undeniable sense of preeminence. However, it was here that Riker was forced to contrast the two.

In Alaska, there was a quiet stewardship whose spirit could be sensed in the grandeur of rivers and forests and among the sweeping glacial vistas. Upon Wendor, the perceived omniscience was more of a ghost than a majestic spirit.

Will's reflections of Wendor were punctuated by the memory of the fear upon Deanna's face, as Worf carried her lifeless body from the citadel's stronghold. He would never forget his grief after seeing her body covered with blood, believing that she was dead.

A long time ago, when their relationship blossomed with the arulla trees on Betazed, she called him Imzadi – Beloved. Deanna had been dismissed from his field of view that had grown narrow by his pursuit of duty. Now, all he could do was stare into her expressionless face, a face frozen in peace by sedation.

She had been a victim upon Betazed eight years ago when he left her behind in the wake of his ambition, just as she had been a victim upon Wendor. Both times he was blinded by the obligations to his uniform, overlooking his responsibilities to her. This time, the price of his neglect had nearly been her life. And this time, he allowed himself to grieve.

Riker was also dimly aware that the fragrant flowers of the blooming arulla trees that he so fondly remembered only a week ago, had already withered into nothingness.

Will reached for Deanna's hand and tenderly stroked it against his face. Dr. Crusher walked into the intensive care ward and immediately sensed her intrusion. The First Officer turned and gestured an invitation that she reluctantly accepted.

The doctor slowly approached him from behind and for a moment, the two watched the sleeping figure in silence. "Don't worry, Will. Deanna's a strong woman," whispered Crusher, wary of disturbing the intimate silence between the two.

"I know."

She placed a comforting hand upon his shoulder. "This is one of those instances when her empathic powers work against her. Physically she's fine. Emotionally, however... Whatever she witnessed has put her into a state of shock. The distress is only compounded by the fact that it touched her on deeper levels than it would have for a human. Her mind has effectively shut itself down."

Riker nodded with a sigh. "Any idea of what was responsible for killing McCaley?"

The doctor bunched her lips and shook her head. "Nothing," she said with a clear sense of futility. "The autopsy revealed very little. The levels of adrenaline in his body are consistent with someone who dies from severe fright."

"Are you saying that he was sliced open after he died?" Riker concluded with a shudder. His next prevailing memory of Wendor was the mutilated body of the slain security officer lying in a pool of blood. "Could it be some animal that's running loose down there?"

Crusher raised her eyebrows. "It's difficult to tell, but I would have to say *no*. There is absolutely no trace of any physical evidence of what attacked him. There are no skin cells, no hair follicles, no teeth marks. In fact, I've begun a separate analysis of the wounds. The incisions on his body are exact and deliberate. Until now, I would have believed that the only way to get that kind of precision would be in a medical facility. There wasn't even a scalpel at the scene. I just don't know," she said.

Riker could sense that she shared his frustration and sense of powerlessness. He also knew that these feelings only undermined the focused discipline needed when confronting the Romulans.

“You should get some sleep, Will,” said Beverly. “You’ve been with her the whole night. It’s almost morning and you look exhausted. I’ll let you know of any change in her condition.”

Riker stiffened with protest. He hadn’t left Deanna’s side since returning to the *Enterprise*.

“Will, the Captain also needs you. We all do. Get some rest,” she said with a more professional tone. “There’s nothing that you can do here.”

She was right and he knew it, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that once again Deanna’s needs were overshadowed by the priority of his duty. With a clear effort, Riker straightened himself, flattening the wrinkles from his uniform and silently left the facility.

Picard’s ire had only intensified. On many occasions throughout his career, it had been difficult to assume the formal courtesies associated with the role of a diplomat. This instance proved to be the most challenging than any other he could recall in recent history.

Thorin’s reputation was divided between that of a brilliant dictator, and that of a savage tyrant. On the one hand, the senator was responsible for the brutal execution of hundreds of his own kind; on the other, these acts of single-minded justice had served to reunite his people and bring order to the chaos that threatened to divide his society.

Still, looking into his callused eyes, Picard could find no esteem that sometimes was earned by a deadly but effective leader.

“It would seem, Senator, that your understanding of the Council granting you permission into Federation space was somewhat premature,” announced Picard to the view screen. Thorin only returned an expression possessing a curious mix of rancor and amusement.

Shalayus stood behind the captain, again paying him an unexpected visit to the bridge. This time he was thankful for her presence in Troi’s absence. Any telepathic leverage that he could gain over Thorin was welcome.

Thorin maliciously grinned. “Captain, did you expect that the Romulan government would be stalled long enough to let your Federation cover its tracks? We both know that the Council was going to agree to our little rendezvous, one way or the other.”

“Well, Senator, it is possible for one to arrive at an alternative scenario of the facts. A scenario where a Federation vessel is mysteriously destroyed at the edge of Romulan space. A scenario where at least one unauthorized Romulan Warbird has been detected. Perhaps it is not the Federation who is using this system for the testing of a new weapon.”

Thorin grinned a shrewd smile. “One who would make such a rash conclusion would be a fool to do so without any proof. Allow me to restate that I only wished to expedite the process, before you could be accused of disposing of any evidence. I had only the Federation’s best interests in mind.”

Picard was quickly growing exasperated. “Senator, the Federation is also committed to uncovering the cause of the *Leviathan*’s fate. We are as alarmed by its destruction as you. I can assure you that we have no desire to launch an attack on the Romulan Empire.”

“And I’m sure that you speak the truth, Picard. I don’t believe that the Federation harbors enough resentment or courage to confront us. This is all about appearances after all, isn’t it? I only wish to comfort my people with the certainty of your words,” he said with a wry smile.

“Good,” replied Picard, selectively dismissing the senator’s sarcasm. “I have been authorized to allow a small Romulan delegation to Wendor’s surface to inspect the planet under a Federation escort.”

“How generous.”

“It is our hope that this gesture of diplomacy will attest to the spirit of cooperation that the Federation seeks between our peoples,” Picard submitted.

“Yes, very delightful. Tell me, Picard, who will be leading our *escort*,” asked Thorin.

Picard smiled with some encouragement. “I have a team of security officers standing by at your behest. At a time of your choosing, I will permit this team to meet you on the planet’s surface,” offered the captain.

“Unacceptable,” Thorin rejected with a frown. “It bears the characteristics of more Federation subterfuge. I will not expose any of this crew to such a risk,” he said with clear exception.

After a moment of reflection, the senator’s eyes cleverly squinted with negotiation as the arrogant smile returned. “Picard, I will accept the Federation’s gracious invitation with a single caveat. I want you to personally escort my people. Your presence on Wendor’s surface guarantees that my men will be safe from any deception. Accordingly, I am prepared to submit myself as one of the delegates, along with the *Krameede*’s captain. As I said, this is about appearances.”

Behind him, Picard could hear Worf growl with rejection. “Agreed,” accepted Picard.

Thorin’s smile became bright. “Now, where would you suggest that we meet, Captain? After all, Wendor is a very large planet.”

“The archeological teams were excavating at what appeared to be Wendor’s capital. I propose that we rendezvous there and tour the general vicinity.”

“Very good,” Thorin endorsed with an exaggerated smile. “However...” he qualified, “before our first encounter, Captain, we detected a small party from your ship at a very specific position inside one of the primary buildings. Curious that you wouldn’t suggest this location.”

Picard shook his head. “There is an unknown danger present at that site. At least one crew member was murdered there, and the science teams that we are trying to locate mysteriously disappeared from those very coordinates.”

Thorin leaned back into his oversized chair and assumed an obtuse façade. “So, then you believe it to be in our best interest to avoid this location.”

“Yes.”

Thorin’s smile immediately tightened like a Numelian snake devouring its prey. “How magnanimous of you, Captain! However, I am faced with a new dilemma. How can I reasonably inform my superiors that we were not permitted to investigate the same location where a team from your ship was conducting unknown business prior to your knowledge of our presence?” he explained. “Can you see the problem? Of course, I am grateful for your warnings, but I must insist, if only for

appearances sake, that we at least be allowed to choose where upon the planet we may inspect.”

Picard’s face darkened. With each concession he had further placed himself in a very unlikely position, a position that was diplomatically impossible to retract from. He could sense the objection of Worf and even that of Shalayus who observed behind in silence. One for the senator.

“I must advise you of Wendor’s thin atmosphere,” relinquished the captain. “My Chief Medical Officer would welcome providing your delegation with an injection of trioxin.”

“Rest assured my delightful Captain, that we have conducted a detailed analysis of the planet and are prepared to take our own countermeasures,” said Thorin. Although his face remained indifferent, his eyes glittered with satisfaction.

“Very well,” concluded Picard. “In one Federation hour, we will meet at coordinates just outside the main citadel.”

“I am so looking forward to it, Captain. Oh, and please make sure that you leave the Sindarian witch aboard your ship,” said Thorin while offering Shalayus a cold scowl. “With some effort, I have grown accustomed to the idea of dealing with you humans. But I am not yet ready to share my company with the sniveling dogs who do your bidding under the guise of equality.”

“Any other stipulations?” scoffed Picard.

“Yes, there is one more. I know the academic mind-set of your Federation. I know that they would never conceive of placing your life in jeopardy, even in exchange for myself and Captain Thelgrin. But rest assured, if you do experience a change of heart, we will be fully prepared to respond to any deception.” Thorin’s eyes blazed with warning.

“Captain, the Warbird is powering up her disruptors,” announced Data.

“Just a precaution, Captain,” assured Thorin before disappearing from the main viewer.

“Captain, I strongly object to you risking your life on the planet’s surface,” Worf roared. “The destruction of the *Leviathan* may be only the beginning of a much larger Romulan plot. There’s no telling what the Romulans will do once they have you alone.”

“I understand your objections, Mr. Worf,” placated Picard. “But I am willing to take this risk if it removes this ship from immediate danger and helps to prevent a war in the process. I do not trust Thorin, but if he was interested in an ambush, he had every opportunity to do so before he decloaked. I haven’t forgotten that he was the one who opened the dialogue between us.”

“Captain, we will have to lower our shields in order to beam you to the planet’s surface. The Warbird’s disruptors are fully charged,” Data tactfully reminded.

“I’m fully aware of our situation, Commander,” dismissed Picard as he rose from his chair and headed for the turbolift.

“You’re a fool, Picard,” Shalayus announced behind him. “You will be making the biggest mistake of your life if you don’t allow me to beam down with you.”

Picard stopped in mid-stride before pivoting to confront the young woman, discarding the last of his diplomacy. “Your misguided opinions mean very little to me,” he scolded. Shalayus momentarily withdrew, unprepared for the sharpness of Picard’s rebuff, but he continued.. “What I do find intriguing is how Thorin recognized you as a Sindarian. I, myself knew very little of your kind before this mission. Perhaps when I return, you wouldn’t mind explaining how a Romulan from across the quadrant is more familiar with your race than a Federation captain.”

Shalayus paused and scrutinized Picard’s face as her green eyes fiercely glared. She underestimated the impact of the recent events had upon him. It was more than the exchange with Thorin she concluded. A member of his crew had been killed, his trusted empath was in a coma, and his ship was facing off against a Warbird that was prepared to send his crew into oblivion.

“Thorin was right,” Shalayus reproached, the fire in her eyes still simmering but tempered. “You humans care for nothing beyond your own reflection. I warn you, Picard, that your time to truly see what your reflection holds is at hand. I hope that you are more prepared than I fear.” She turned and left the bridge in silence, except for the faint whisper of her robes echoing behind her.

As Will had forewarned, Wendor's atmosphere had an unpleasant texture that yielded an equally objectionable residue upon exposed skin. Picard immediately began to wipe away the perspiration from his forehead. Dr. Crusher seemed less burdened by Wendor's oppressiveness. The captain wondered if the doctor had grown accustomed to the inhospitable conditions, or if the discomfort had been surpassed by the perceived danger of the citadel's phantom threat.

Picard was also aware of his labored breathing, a reflex to the thin oxygen. He recalled the arduous trek into the Evacca mountains on Sindar. However, the memory of fresh mountain air filled with autumn's aspirations was quickly squelched by Wendor's harsh ozone and strong sulfurous odor.

The captain surveyed the absent landscape. They were near the center of the metropolis, much of which was buried underneath Wendor's dead soil. Beyond the skyline, a brood of mountains lamented the dead city. The lone afternoon sun filtered through the pale orange sky, piercing the akreonic clouds that trespassed overhead. Green lightning randomly traversed the sky, like a warning from the heavens.

"What if Thorin objects to my presence, Jean-Luc?" Beverly asked after Picard finished his cursory scan of the surroundings.

"At this point, I don't give a damn. The missing scientific teams are still very much a priority of this mission. If we should happen upon them during our tour, I want to be fully prepared."

"Also, if we meet whatever preyed upon McCaley," Beverly added in a subdued voice.

Picard nodded with silent agreement. He shifted as he turned to confront the silent citadel not more than a kilometer west of them.

The dark celadon structure rose from the heart of the city, clearly towering over its lesser siblings. Even though over thirty meters of its massive base was now covered by sand, it still rose another thousand meters above the ground.

The building's construction appeared to uniquely share the characteristics of both marble and steel – much like Sindar's lost city. It sat in the center of several clusters of small dome shaped buildings that were fitted with rows of curious spikes along the roofs, like the spine of

a mythical dragon. Large arterial shapes twisted along the tower's neck – a tower that rose like a blade of a sword.

Near the pinnacle, the tower unfolded into four long fingers of a grotesque hand, a claw of an unknown beast. Inside the angry grip rested a lone tower, its secrets closely guarded by the spires.

Four flying buttresses secured the tower, each dually serving as walkways whose destination lay hidden in the dunes below.

The building was monstrous, Picard observed, suddenly recalling the *Jadi K'Tor*, the hideous ship that lay for centuries half-buried in the Evacca mountains. Shalayus had said that its name meant something between 'aftermath' and 'beginning'. Here, it could only mean the former.

The abominable building cast an equally fantastic shadow upon the ground, enveloping the city in its four fingered grasp. Whatever life that this city once boasted had long been plundered by the strange greenish clouds that billowed overhead.

The wind suddenly kicked up, weaving another thin blanket of sand over the city, slowly reclaiming it a grain at a time. They were both forced to cover their faces to protect from the assault. For a moment, the akreonic clouds covered the sun, robbing even the light from the barren planet.

As the wind continued to unleash its uncontested challenges, Picard could hear a strange sound reverberating underneath the wind's breath. He was certain it was nothing more than the resonant hum of the absent wind blowing through the many buildings. But for a moment, he let himself believe it was a voice. He couldn't make it out, but he knew that he had heard the words before – a long time ago in the memory of another lifetime.

The lament faded before it was replaced by the growing hum of a transporter beam. Two figures quickly materialized to their right, each bearing a sharp contrast to the other. The shorter man stood at rigid attention and was dressed in formal military regalia. Towering over him was Thorin dressed in less restricting attire, swathed in a long charcoal cloak. His casual stance immediately conveyed a swaggering confidence, a trait polished by the years spent in the Romulan Senate.

In person, Thorin was even taller than he had appeared upon the main viewer. Even upon the Klingon home world this man would have been considered tall. Upon his native Romulus, he was an oddity.

His serene expression soon adopted its cold grimace, as the lean frame took several purposeful steps towards them. The senator lurched over Picard and bore his gaze into the captain.

“Captain, with my deepest sincerity, it is a delight to finally meet you in person,” said Thorin.

“Senator, on behalf of the Federation, I welcome you to the planet Wendor,” accepted Picard. “Allow me to introduce my Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Beverly Crusher.”

“Yes,” Thorin responded while bowing his head. “I know the names of all your senior officers, Captain. I assume that her presence here is for precautionary reasons only.”

“Of course,” Picard confirmed.

“I am glad that you decided not to bring the android along. When I had learned that the Federation recognized that toy as possessing the full rights and privileges of a man, I knew that it was the beginning of the end for your kind,” he sneered. Even Thorin’s grim-faced companion shared a brief snicker.

“This is Captain Thelgrin,” he nodded to the figure behind him. The Romulan captain remained at attention but deigned a curt bow.

Thorin took an exaggerated breath, demonstrating his apparent vitality despite the wan oxygen supply. He surveyed the landscape and immediately scowled. “Only the Federation would find such interest in a graveyard. Archeology is a morbid profession, don’t you think? Reveling in the coffins of dead strangers... What a breed you humans are.” He cocked an eye to the captain. “What is it that the Federation found so important to redeploy so many men away from the military?”

“Well, there were many scientific teams analyzing the planet, not just archeologists. Some were studying the planet for possible terraforming prospects, others were focusing upon the unusual meteorological aspects of the planet. What makes this world so intriguing is the technological advancement of the planet’s lost inhabitants. It is rare that a society this evolved suddenly disappears and becomes unilaterally erased from history.”

Thorin rolled his eyes in debate but said nothing more. With an exaggerated gesture he allowed Picard to assume the lead towards the citadel.

In two distinct pairs they continued towards the immense building, exchanging no words during the thirty-minute hike. As the sun headed for the western sky, they soon became enveloped in the citadel's lengthening shadow.

When they reached the building, they were forced to circle its perimeter to determine the best point of entry. After Picard consulted the map on Crusher's tricorder, he elected upon one of the several arched openings. Picard braced himself for Thorin's objections, however, the Romulan offered no debate. In fact, the senator seemed unusually eager to enter the fortification. With full bravado, Thorin insisted upon entering the passageway first.

"Senator, I must warn you again that there is an unknown phenomena that has killed a member of my crew," reminded Picard. "The Federation cannot guarantee your safety."

"Captain, I have learned that fear exists only with ignorance," remarked Thorin with uncharacteristic reflection. "Accordingly, I know no fear."

One by one they passed underneath the oppressive arches. Once inside, Picard began to navigate their descent through the labyrinthine corridors, occasionally consulting the tricorder.

The interior of the building was similar to the surreal exterior. Huge archways guarded overhead, while stairways spiraled into oblivion. Just as Picard had come to expect from his time on Sindar, the fortress bore no trace of art, no flaunt of artistic expression.

The massive bulk of the building was dutifully supported by tremendous obsidian columns that held little regard for the ephemeral beings that scurried beneath them.

Only the echo of their lone footsteps rising into the vaulted ceilings marked their trespass.

Thorin paused and placed both hands upon his hips while performing a survey of the gloomy interior. "What a charming abode," he sneered. "It is little wonder that these creatures are now extinct."

As they continued their descent, they occasionally happened upon traces of the Federation science teams. Thorin paused to deliberately

inspect each piece as if trying to decide if they were authentic or mere props. Eventually the light dimmed, forcing Picard and the doctor to resort to their palm beacons.

Unlike the expansive rooms above, the building's characteristic changed as they descended farther into the fortress's depths. The corridors became narrow and constrictive, forcing the tall senator to hunch over. Picard couldn't help the feeling that the building was consuming them, slowly digesting the party as they advanced deeper into the building's innards.

They continued in silence, conserving their precious ration of air. The mood had become somber, as only the dim pulse of the lights stood between them and absolute darkness. Eventually, a small point of light became visible from the opposite end of the long passageway. After a brief consultation with her tricorder, Crusher nodded to Picard. Their destination lay just ahead.

Suddenly a loud crash echoed along the narrow hallway, causing the walls and floor to vibrate. Crusher gripped the captain's arm tightly. Even Picard became rigid, while the Romulans adopted a defensive stance. After no further incident, Thorin relaxed and smiled.

"More specters, Picard?" he asked.

As they approached the central annex, it became apparent that the source of illumination was the network of lighting elements installed by the science teams. Crusher withdrew with a puzzled expression. Somehow between her prior visit and now, the elements had resumed full operation.

One by one, they entered the room. Thorin paraded about the chamber with fanfare, fully appreciating the value of this expedition in terms of Romulan public opinion. Thelgrin followed him with less occasion, lacking the senator's theatrical zeal. In fact, the Warbird captain's demeanor had become increasingly disagreeable. Picard guessed that Thelgrin's presence was gained only after considerable protest.

Crusher entered the room last and immediately separated herself from her memories of it. Being able to professionally distance herself from her emotions was a trait that had been gained after many years of being a surgeon. She was never so appreciative of it as she was at this moment.

The doctor immediately focused upon an isolated spot upon the floor and slowly approached it with uncertainty. She knelt over the location, running her fingers through the fine dirt. She activated her tricorder and monitored the hovering instrument with a fully vexed expression.

“Captain,” she called in disbelief. “There’s absolutely no trace of McCaley’s blood. His body was lying right here, in a pool of it.”

Thorin offered only an unsympathetic grin. “So, Picard, where is your monster? Or has your story changed in that regard, Dr. Beverly?” he smugly asked. The senator continued to boast about the room. With child-like fascination, he touched every object within his reach. Meanwhile, Thelgrin’s objection continued to brew in the rear of the room.

Crusher’s brow tightened as she became transfixed upon her tricorder. She raised herself from the spot where McCaley’s body was recovered, as something more immediate gained her attention. Her face grew increasingly anxious as she turned around and returned to the entranceway. Her fingers deftly moved across the control panel as she confirmed her findings.

“Captain,” she called out with sudden anticipation. “I’m detecting numerous life forms on the level below us.”

“Are they the missing scientists?” asked Picard.

The doctor returned to her instrument for a final verification. “The only thing that I can tell for certain is that there are approximately sixty life forms in a room directly below this one,” she said.

Picard nodded. “Hail Commander Riker and see if the *Enterprise* can confirm your findings. Have him determine the quickest route from here.”

Thelgrin angrily eyed Picard who hastened to join Crusher at the hall’s threshold. As Picard passed him, Thelgrin’s pendulous eyes deferred their objection upon Thorin.

“*Fvadt!* Senator,” snapped Thelgrin. “I agreed to your request to join these humans for a brief tour of the planet, but I will not agree to take part in their rescue operations. I’m a Warbird commander. I have a ship to command. Carrying on with this charade is not within my orders. If you do not grant me permission to return to the *Krameede*, I will enter a formal protest when we return to Romulus.”

Thorin smoldered at the reprimand of a subordinate. His face grew dark, vowing to exact a reprisal under more private conditions. His anger transformed into a mock smile as he turned towards Picard.

“I must agree with the captain,” he said as he approached them. “Your internal troubles are of little concern to us. I would think that your first priority would be to avoid a confrontation between our peoples.”

“Then let me allow a rescue team to beam down,” proposed Picard.

Thorin’s smile quickly faded. “Absolutely not!” he cursed. “You dangerously underestimate me, Picard. This has all the blunt trappings of a Federation ambush.”

Picard acquiesced and assumed a less intimidating stance. “I assure you this is not a trap. I urge you to reconsider. There may be over sixty lives at risk. I give you my word as a Federation captain.”

Thorin softened, apparently soothed by Picard’s subservient tone. “I’m sure that you harbor no ill against me. But consider how this would affect my image. What leader would I seem if I agreed to put myself and Captain Thelgrin in such a precarious position, on the basis of your word alone? For appearances sake, the only way that I would agree to a Federation team beaming down is if I was permitted to invite a Romulan security party of equal size. And is that something that you really want? Two sides armed with weapons and nervous fingers? Picard, you disappoint me even for a human. Are your objectives so narrow that you are unwilling to sacrifice the lives of a handful of scientists in order to preserve the lives of millions?

Behind them, there was a loud snap like the cracking of a tree in a lightning storm. It was immediately followed by a heavy thud and the sound of a soft gurgle.

In unison, the trio turned towards the source of the unusual noise. Directly before them, the body of Captain Thelgrin lay face-down in a puddle of blood that quickly engulfed his head.

Startled, Crusher dropped her tricorder as Thorin rushed over to the body with a hiss. The doctor quickly regained her instrument and hurried to the fallen captain and immediately began a scan.

“His neck is broken, besides the wounds to the face,” assessed Crusher with the tricorder’s assistance. “His level of adrenaline is the Romulan equivalent to McCaley’s. This man died of extreme fear.”

Thorin turned in wrath, his pleasant facade quickly replaced by hostility. “Am I supposed to believe that? I think that this was staged in order to throw us off your trail. I think that we were coming too close to your little Federation scheme. This whole business about a phantom monster is nothing more than a deception, a scarecrow. Let me convince you, Captain, that I am not so easily frightened away.”

“Senator, I can assure you, there is no deception here on the Federation’s part,” Picard adamantly replied. “I invite you to beam to our ship and oversee the autopsy of your officer. You may share in the findings and allow me to prove what I say. But I strongly urge that we leave this place immediately.”

Thorin considered the captain’s response before tightening his eyes with revelation. “Ahhh! You may be cleverer than you seem,” he winced, perceiving Picard under a stronger light. “By eliminating the captain, you place me in the dubious position of assuming command of the *Krameede*. Perhaps you think in the absence of an experienced and skilled commander, that I would hesitate in taking any hostile action. Well, you are very mistaken, Captain. I will have an investigation performed upon *my* ship. If I discover even a shred of evidence that the Federation is responsible for this man’s death, I will make you and your ship pay dearly for the burden that you have imposed upon me.” His eyes glittered with a threat, before tapping his black wristband. “This is Thorin, beam us up immediately.”

Within an instant, Thorin and the slain captain began to dematerialize. Thorin’s formidable eyes affixed upon Picard, silently vowing revenge.

Picard tapped his communicator pin. “Number One. Lock on to our current position and beam us up at once.”

The doors to the bridge opened with an urgent gasp. Riker watched the captain enter and tried to judge the success of the mission from Picard’s impassive face. Riker rose from the command chair and offered it to the captain, who appeared preoccupied with the image of the Warbird upon the main viewer.

“Would I be correct in assuming that your meeting with Thorin did not go well?” asked the First Officer.

“Indeed, Number One. It did not go well at all,” said the captain without turning from the view screen. “The *Krameede*’s captain was killed, in the same manner as Ensign McCaley.”

Riker’s face became downcast. “That means that Thorin is now in command of the Warbird,” he concluded aloud.

Picard gripped his armrests and nodded affirmatively. “A point that he made very clear, Number One.” He returned his gaze to the *Krameede*. “Mr. Data, is there any change in the Warbird’s status?”

“None, Captain.”

“Trouble?” asked Will.

“I’m not certain that I convinced Thorin that we were not responsible for the captain’s death. He still suspects that this is all a part of a Federation coverup.” Picard winced with pain as he became aware of a dull ache in his chest. He quickly dismissed it as nothing more than the lingering effects of Wendor’s thin oxygen.

“Lieutenant Data, any word from Starfleet?” asked the captain, not bothering to turn and face him. The ache became a dull burn.

“Nothing, Captain.”

Picard rubbed his temples, hoping to alleviate his discomfort. Instead, the pain became stronger than before.

“What now?” asked Riker. “Do we sit and wait for the Romulans to make the first move?”

“No, Number One. Dr. Crusher detected approximately sixty life forms on one of the lower levels. I want another away team assembled with a full security complement.” Picard’s throat constricted, making it difficult to breathe. He promised himself that the next time he returned to the planet, he wouldn’t refuse the trioxin.

“Captain, I’m detecting unusual readings from the planet,” Data announced.

“What kind, Data?” requested Riker with growing alarm.

“It’s a confined energy field, approximately two meters in mass bearing an unknown signature,” said Data. “It is rising from the planet’s surface, and it appears to be headed towards the ship.”

Riker turned to Picard. The image of the *Leviathan* exploding in Wendor’s orbit by a mysterious force echoed in his mind. Picard

immediately rose from his chair and approached the conn. “Ensign, prepare to remove us from Wendor’s orbit and take us to a position...”

Boom!

Picard crumpled to the floor.

“Captain!” called Riker, causing the others to turn in urgency.

Picard rolled himself over, his vision clouded. He desperately gasped for air, as the realization of his folly crystallized. But he couldn’t speak, couldn’t tell the others what was wrong.

Boom! Boom!

Picard’s chest violently heaved again, leaving him virtually paralyzed with pain. He clutched at his heart with both hands.

Boom!

The assault jolted him again, but his immobilized body was slow to react. Life was draining from him, and he knew that he could not bear the pain much longer. Picard’s eyes opened in a haze, seeing only the distressed face of Riker hovering over him. Riker was saying something. Picard heard the words, but they possessed no meaning.

“Medical Emergency!” Riker shouted at the ship communications system. “Dr. Crusher to the bridge immediately!”

“What’s wrong, Will?” urged the doctor’s voice.

“It’s the captain’s artificial heart. It must have been affected by the akreon. He’s suffering from a cardiac arrest.”

Boom! Boom!

Picard could no longer react as the pain wrenched through him. His breathing dimmed as darkness began to overtake him. Riker’s mouth continued to move, but there was no longer any sound save his mechanical heart beating its final time. Shadows began to overtake him, filling his vision and thoughts.

All he could focus upon was the swirling circle of light that suddenly appeared behind Riker’s head. The light revolved as it grew in intensity, keeping the numbing darkness at bay. Picard focused upon nothing else.

Picard lay near death, between the breaths of reality and a dream-world. And the figure that suddenly materialized behind his First Officer was an agent of both. It stood motionlessly, gazing hard upon the fallen captain with its ebony eyes.

It appeared to be a man, and as something more than one. It was cloaked in midnight, as obsidian as the intricate columns of Wendorian marble, and as eternal as the shadows they cast. His face and hair were almost pure white, as majestic as the frozen hydrogen glaciers of Alkarun VII. Its features were noble, profound beyond the limits of mortality.

As reality continued to recede from the captain's rationality, Picard allowed himself to believe that he was staring into a vision of an angel.

The specter hovered closer to the stricken captain, its deep eyes filling him with a strange sense of calm. The figure cast no shadow upon the bridge, reaffirming Picard's suspicions that he was now gazing upon a divine vision from the afterlife.

The being solemnly raised his hands. Picard could now see that its fingers were bent, touching the other hand to form a diamond shape. He knew that he had seen such a figure before, but he could no longer remember where.

But there was something else familiar about the entity, something that summoned altogether different memories. Images of war and sorrow, tragedy and despair.

As the specter drew closer, Riker leaped back with clear astonishment, validating for Picard that the being was real and not some final hallucination.

The regal shadow stood directly before Picard, filling his vision. Gently, it knelt beside him and immediately placed a single hand upon the captain's heart. Picard felt a strange power shoot through his stricken body.

Picard tried to breathe as the final trace of oxygen expired, but he could not. His consciousness began to completely lapse from all thoughts. The being's face leaned closer, the black irises expanding – eclipsing all else. Picard found peace within the tranquility of those eyes. He realized that it was those eyes that he remembered, a recollection that brought the rest of the face into focus.

He had seen the face before, a long time ago in a distant memory. At a conference, on Hared IV.

As the shadows overcame him, Picard slipped into the cold black abyss that yawned beneath him. With his last breath he whispered a name. "Sydell..."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The *d'k tahg* evenly rested across Worf's outstretched fingers. His hands began to quiver with fatigue after several long minutes of holding the heavy knife in such an unconventional fashion. Heedless, the Klingon continued his silent prayer, hovering the hot blade over a candle flame.

The sharp edges of the *d'k tahg* glistened with the promise of candlelight, its glow exalting the three-bladed weapon. Worf stared into his gilded reflection, transfixed upon the knife and the equally grave reflection that returned his solemn expression. Even after the door to his quarters whistled with summons, the Klingon found it difficult to withdraw from the spell the blade had cast.

"Enter," Worf said without turning, not daring to release his gaze from the mesmerizing glow.

The door opened and Shalayus slowly entered the room, overwhelmed by the wealth of Klingon culture that suddenly confronted her. She headed towards Worf with wayward steps, as her full attention lingered upon the many pieces that offered an unusual glimpse into the otherwise guarded Security Officer. When she finally reached him, she curiously eyed the kneeling Klingon, uncertain of the role that the *d'k tahg* played in Worf's meditations.

"I hope that I have not disturbed you, Uutsa Lia," she apologized. "But I arrived at the time that you requested."

"No, I was just finishing the preparations," assured Worf. "I have asked you here to join me in a Klingon ritual called the *Rhukh T'magh*. It is one of the many ceremonies that prepare a warrior for combat. It also readies the warrior to be presented to Kahless the Unforgettable, if the warrior is slain in battle."

Worf gently rested his blade upon the table next to the candle and rose to join his guest. Shalayus continued to meander about the room, casually admiring the artifacts. She paused in front of the wall where the *bat'leth* – the sword of honor, reverently hung. The Klingon smiled as he approached Shalayus from behind, as her interest renewed his own admiration for the ancient weapon.

"Who is Kahless?" she asked without taking her eyes from the *bat'leth*.

Worf's face beamed with respect. "He is the great warrior who first united the Klingon Empire. His tales of honor and courage are legendary among my people. It is our belief that Kahless awaits in Sto-Vo-Kor and those warriors who die honorably join him there. Before his death, he promised that he would one day return. My people have long awaited that day."

Shalayus smiled before turning to face the Klingon. "The beliefs of my people also remember such a being, much like your Kahless," she said. "Our legends are filled with the name J'Conan Zorr, an incarnation of the great Dalikor. Zorr appeared at times when conflict and chaos ruled Wendor. Zorr's words echoed the Dalikor's wisdom, words that redeemed my people from ignorance. And like Kahless, Zorr began a journey of Being, promising that with his return, we would embrace a new era of existence."

"He, too must have been a great warrior," Worf observed.

Shalayus turned away and approached the table at the center of the living area, captivated by the statue she found there. The sculpture was of two Klingon warriors locked in combat. She gently traced the fingers of her left hand along the statue's profile, closing her eyes to heighten her perceptions.

Worf eyed her with great affection for her sudden interest in Klingon tradition. "The statue depicts the epic battle between Kahless and his brother Morath," Worf proudly explained. "They fought for twelve days and nights because Morath had lied and brought dishonor to the family. Kahless's commitment to honor is what every Klingon strives to attain."

The Sindarian released the statue and slowly nodded. "The life of your Kahless demonstrates good conquering evil," she concluded aloud. "Those lessons were important to your race at that time in their early development. But as you progress along the path of Being, Uutsa Lia, the truths become more profound."

Worf's face became clouded. "What do you mean? There can be no greater truth than good conquering evil, that honor is more powerful than betrayal."

"It was the Dalikor who first showed us that there is no good or evil, only Anthim. The powers of J'Karr and J'Kree are distinct

manifestations of Anthim, but they are one power, not two. They remain in Konjor, a balance between opposition and joining.”

Worf shook his head with disbelief. “You believe that good and evil are one and the same?”

Shalayus’ tone softened, appreciating Worf’s sensitivity to his native beliefs. “Not really. Through Konjor, J’Karr and J’Kree are the instruments of evolution. An imbalance in J’Kree, the negative pole of Anthim, results in an equal opposite reaction in J’Karr, the positive side. This re-achieves the equilibrium within Konjor. That which suffers from this momentary imbalance either redeems itself through wisdom or is damned to be destroyed by the folly of its own blind ignorance. Either outcome diminishes J’Kree and leaves J’Karr stronger through the reaffirmation of itself. This fundamental truth prevails over all things, from the burning cores of a thousand suns to the soul of a single being.”

“I do not understand,” responded Worf.

Shalayus moved towards the center of the room as if its focus strengthened her meaning. “Think of it as a traveler who must bear a heavy burden. By the end of the journey, the traveler is made stronger for his effort. The greater the burden, the greater the strength that is summoned to meet the challenge. The promise of Zorr, is such a challenge. That which you have been taught to be evil is only a vacancy that awaits the fulfillment of J’Karr. By the revolution achieved by the opposing dynamics of J’Karr and J’Kree does life progress along the path of Being.”

“Who is the Dalikor?” asked Worf, intrigued by the woman’s quiet passion.

“In a time of great conflict, the Dalikor awoke a great fire of ancient wisdom and melded the powers of J’Karr and J’Kree. Legend tells that she was once a mortal woman, but after she had finished, she rose like a great bird over the land.”

“I have heard many legends that tell of a great bird that is resurrected from the ashes,” Worf noted with fascination.

“The memories of the Dalikor travel far,” she said. “Her story is the very core of our beliefs. Her sacrifice restored order to our world. The vision of the valiant bird rising from the fires of Anthim brings hope to my people. It is a symbol of rebirth and redemption.”

“Redemption is a precious gift,” observed Worf. “For a time, I was shunned by my people because of the lies of another. It was when my family’s honor was restored that I fully appreciated what it meant to be Klingon.”

Shalayus’s face grew sullen as she lowered her emerald eyes to the floor. “My people await the day when we can be restored. We have waited millennia for Zorr, for his return will mark the day when my kind can earn our redemption. It is said that the Dalikor will rise again from the flames of Anthim.”

“I hope that for the sake of your people’s honor that the day draws near,” offered Worf, sensing the woman’s sorrow.

“Forgive me, Uutsa Lia,” apologized Shalayus. “Once again, I have burdened you with the plight of my kind. You have asked me to join you in a Klingon tradition. Tell me about the ritual that will preserve your honor even in death.”

“The Rhukh T’magh allows the inner warrior within the soul of a Klingon to become focused for battle. It is typically a private ceremony between a warrior and his d’k tahg. But there are times when someone who is dear is asked to participate, to vow that the memory of the warrior will be preserved if they are slain in combat.”

“I am honored that you have asked me to join you,” said the woman, the glow in her eyes renewed.

“And I am honored that you are here,” Worf reciprocated.

Together they returned to Worf’s shrine as he picked up the cooled d’k tahg. He raised the blade and placed it to his large forehead, staring into the reflected candlelight as he did so.

“batlh muvwI' yIchu',” he exclaimed. *Accept my soul with honor.*

Worf shifted the blade between his hands, tightening his grip. He held his right hand directly above the candle flame and ran the knife over the palm. The edge of the blade immediately turned red.

“HeghDI' tIqIj wIvnIS, tIq vISov,” he concluded while handing the weapon to Shalayus who held it with reverence. *Remember my soul when I die.*

“Now you must place the d’k tahg into the candle. This will seal the joining of my blood with the knife, unifying my soul with the inner warrior. This will also honor my memory as you carry the remembrance of this act for the rest of your days.”

Shalayus approached the candle and studied the unusual weapon. It shimmered with the candlelight, becoming instantly hypnotic. Instead of placing the knife into the fire, she held it to her head, following Worf's example.

“batlh qa'wI' Dalajchugh,” she whispered as she turned her hand over the fire and ran the blade over her palm to Worf's amazement. “HeghDI' tIqIj wIvniS, tIq vISoy,” she vowed as she plunged the weapon into the fire. The candle blazed with satisfaction, appeased by the offering of their combined blood.

She turned to Worf, her palm still dripping. “May my memory be preserved in your thoughts if I am slain.”

Worf bowed his head, clearly moved beyond words. “You honor me deeply,” he whispered.

“Riker to Lieutenant Worf!” interrupted an urgent plea over the ship's communications system.

Worf's eyes lingered upon Shalayus as he responded. “Worf here.”

“Security Alert! There is an intruder on the bridge, the captain is down.”

“Acknowledged,” shouted Worf. In an instant his frame stiffened with duty. “Transporter room three, this is Lieutenant Worf. Security condition Alpha-One. Initiate site-to-site transport from my present location to the main bridge immediately,” he commanded.

Worf drew his phaser while urgently awaiting the signal that separated him from his unknown adversary. Shalayus opened her mouth and prepared to speak, but she knew that she had been instantly dismissed by the stalwart Klingon's sense of duty. Her hesitation cost her the opportunity to say anything at all as Worf faded into the argent frenzy of a transporter beam and was gone.

Shalayus turned again to gaze upon the statue of Kahless, his battle with Morath captured for an eternity by an anonymous Klingon artist. Like the sage Klingon warrior, Worf also held honor and commitment above all else, even his feelings for her. She wondered if he would be so reflective when the time came for her to set aside personal feelings and meet the obligations that awaited her.

Worf materialized upon the main bridge and within an instant he assessed the situation. Picard lay upon the floor in the foreground of the command area, eclipsed by the urgent efforts of Dr. Crusher who hovered over the fallen captain.

Behind the group of onlookers stood a figure of frozen midnight. It was as black and majestic as the starless evenings upon the Klingon moon of Praxis – a moon reduced to a low gravitational planetoid by a near century old explosion, its legacy of ash and dust forever trapped in its thinned atmosphere.

Worf squinted his eyes with indecision. He was fully prepared to encounter a Romulan assassin, and the anonymity of this unexpected adversary caused him to hesitate. But Worf quickly shrugged off his uncertainty and aimed his weapon at the silent specter.

“No Worf!” shouted the captain with all the strength that he could summon. Worf’s face involuntarily scowled as he reluctantly withdrew his phaser.

The captain raised his upper body upon his unsteady arms, despite Crusher’s protests. He appeared mildly disoriented, but nonetheless fully cognizant. After summoning a boost of stamina with several labored breaths, he attempted to stand.

“Jean-Luc, don’t get up. You’re too weak,” scolded the doctor. “Let me beam you to sick bay and ...”

Suddenly a shadow passed between, leaving Dr. Crusher’s advice unfinished and her mouth agape.

The being leaned towards Picard and extended his hand. The captain’s gaze lingered upon the offering, slowly following the length of the arm as he focused upon the figure. His eyes widened.

“Sydell,” he gasped, realizing that the being’s identity wasn’t a hallucination of his seizure. Picard accepted the gloved hand, and in a moment, he was whisked to his feet to the clear astonishment of those around him.

“You saved my life,” acknowledged Picard with wonder.

The ivory face returned a smile. “No, Captain, I acted only as a catalyst for the strength of your spirit. I am honored to have been given the opportunity.”

“Captain Sydell, your sudden arrival is most advantageous, and quite unexpected,” Picard said while trying to regain his focus upon the nebulous shape. “I am eager to learn what has happened to you and your crew after your ship was destroyed,” he said with understatement, noting the unusual uniform of his benefactor.

The apparition of Sydell was encased within a black exoskeleton, a cocoon as strangely wrought as the haunting architecture of Wendor. A long cloak unfurled behind him, a shadow that channeled his movements, an echo of his immaculacy.

“Captain Picard, there is much that we need to discuss. So much that you need to understand. There is a far greater threat to the sanctity of your Federation than the lone Romulan Warbird that circles Wendor’s skies.”

Picard offered only a grim expression, uncertain of the significance that Sydell’s return had upon the mission, or of the mysterious power that had been used to save his life. Whatever happened to him since the *Leviathan*’s destruction, Sydell had become as much as an enigma as the cloaked world that turned beneath them.

“Understood,” acknowledged Picard. “Perhaps we should continue this discussion in my ready room.”

“Jean-Luc, at least come to sickbay and let me perform a diagnostic on your artificial heart,” urged Beverly. “The akreon may have caused some permanent damage. You may experience further complications.”

“There is no need for that Doctor,” negated Sydell. “For the moment, your captain is safe.”

From the moment that the doors closed behind him, Picard couldn’t shake the feeling that he had entered his ready room alone. He headed for his desk, immediately noting the absence of accompanying footsteps behind him. There was no sound, no breathing, no motion, as if he had stepped into a void.

Yet despite his senses, he could feel someone or something trailing him, hovering in the back of his mind. When Picard reached his chair, he decisively turned to challenge his perceptions, feeling like a child exposing his nightmares to the verdict of light.

And he wasn’t alone. Standing in front of the desk was the being that resembled a Federation captain but was also something different.

Picard offered Sydell his choice of empty chairs, but he ignored the invitation. Instead, he toured the ready room with great interest. Picard was careful not to disturb Sydell's inspection, finding the strange vision equally fascinating.

It was then that Picard observed something unusual, almost imperceptible about Sydell. As he freely wandered about the room, Picard could discern a trace of a limp in Sydell's right leg. It was inconspicuous and easily overlooked by a casual observer, but there was something about it – something that strangely drew his attention.

“Captain Sydell,” called Picard, his need for intelligence outweighing his fascination with the reticent figure. “Did any other of the *Leviathan's* crew survive?”

Sydell came to an abrupt halt in front of the large painting of the *Enterprise* journeying through the cosmos. Sydell cocked his head as if the painting recalled something from the shadows of memory. “Alas, I am all that remains,” he replied.

Picard frowned. “What of the expedition of missing scientists? We have been unsuccessful in locating their whereabouts.”

Sydell hovered his hand over the painting, as close as he could without touching it. “Their lives have been hidden by the Huundhraeyl,” he responded, eventually turning away from the painting to meet Picard's inquisitive stare.

“You know of this Huundhraeyl?” Picard asked, clearly astonished. “I had believed that it was only a reference from an eclectic mythology, but...”

“It exists,” truncated Sydell.

Picard leaned his chin into his accommodating palm. “How did you survive the *Leviathan's* destruction. According to her last transmission, you were on her bridge just as the ship exploded.”

Suddenly they were interrupted by a growing commotion from just outside the ready room. An instant later, the door abruptly opened and Shalayus rushed into the office. Worf raced after her and quickly maneuvered to block her further intrusion into the room.

“Shalayus, I cannot permit you to...” protested the Lieutenant.

“J'lyle Kuuzaad!” cried Shalayus, recoiling from the image of Sydell before bowing her head.

Sydell smiled and returned the gesture. “*Ni la son pi seara, Wendira-kahn,*” he greeted.

“*Atsila Malukir,*” whispered Shalayus with reverent awe, her head remaining bowed.

Picard shot from his chair, his ire at the Sindarian’s trespass suddenly overcome by confusion. “What is the meaning of this? Do you know this man?” he demanded.

Before Shalayus could respond, Sydell turned to him. “Yes, Captain Picard. She knows me, as she should. I am pleased that my people have not forgotten me.”

“Not forgotten? Your people?” Picard repeated in bewilderment.

“Captain Picard, the man you knew as Carden Sydell is no more. His physical body serves merely as a host so that I may communicate with you.”

Picard’s face remained impassive, but his eyes glittered with intrigue. “Then who are you?” he asked in a more deliberate tone, possessing a measure of inherent suspicion.

“My name is J’Conan Zorr,” announced the figure, a fraction above a whisper.

Picard eyes darkened. “I have heard that name before, in the city on Sindar,” he said, recalling the relief of the Dalikor. “Zorr was a Wendorian prophet who promised to return one day.”

“I am honored that you know of me,” Zorr modestly acknowledged with a slight bow of his head. “A thousand years ago, I delivered upon my promise. I returned to Wendor, only to find the planet a graveyard. I waited for the children of Wendor to return, but the skies remained silent,” he lamented. “But there is no time for reflection, I am here to warn you. To warn you as well as to deliver an urgent message, an offer to your Federation.”

“Warn me against what?” urged Picard.

“Captain Picard, you face not one peril but two. The first and the most immediate, is the wrath of the *Trujulian F’Dar.*”

“Trujulian F’Dar,” repeated Picard, invoking the word from his memory outside of Creet’s peetsu. “The Hammer of God.”

“The presence of the first Federation ship summoned the F’Dar’s anger. I tried to warn them, but without a host body, I was unable to

communicate with them. If you are not cautious, your ship may soon share their peril.”

“And the second threat?”

Zorr raised his hand, deferring the question. He withdrew from the group and returned to the picture of the starship, his cape whispering behind him.

“When I left Wendor, I promised to return and lead my people to their redemption, to deliver them to a new era of Becoming. Alas my people are no more. In those centuries of waiting for a day that would never be, I have come to learn of your Federation; how much your people remind me of my own. So full of arrogance, so full of passion – so much so that they have blinded themselves from the truth. Your Federation has driven themselves to the brink of destruction, just as the Wendorians did in their early years.”

“You mentioned an offer,” Picard reminded.

He turned from the picture and held Picard within the power of his gaze. “I wish to save you, just as I saved my people, just as I have returned to resurrect their fire from the smoldering embers of the Dalikor’s legacy. If you deliver me from this planet and allow me to speak to your Federation Council, I’m certain that I can convince them of their peril. I can lead your people to their salvation, and away from the abyss that they have created.”

Picard eyed Zorr with a mix of fascination and distrust. “I will contact my superiors and inform them of your request,” he offered.

“Tell them to decide quickly, for every fleeting moment brings them closer to their extinction,” Zorr warned.

Zorr moved to the center of the room and raised his hands together to form a diamond over his chest. He stared at Picard with his dark eyes, and for a moment, he thought that there was something familiar about those eyes. Something that reminded him of the past. But before he could recall the memory, the being began to shimmer with a silver light as his body metamorphosed into a sapphire glow, and abruptly vanished.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Lieutenant Data stood before the captain and studied his sour expression with fascination. The android was continually intrigued by the various moods exhibited by the human members of the *Enterprise* crew and often spent many hours attempting to replicate the subtle characteristics. Unfortunately, this exercise did little to improve his comprehension of these otherwise unfathomable emotions.

Nonetheless, Data was captivated as Picard somberly stared into the small view screen. Slowly, the captain's face became more troubled as he continued to read the passages that scrolled across the screen. Even if Data could not share in the captain's concern, he did his best to duplicate the sense of gravity that his commanding officer exhibited.

Data had quietly remained at attention for three minutes and twenty-four seconds since entering Picard's ready room. The android knew that it was more than the late hour that contributed to Picard's disquiet and was fully certain that his findings would only add to the captain's apprehension.

"Yes, Mr. Data?" Picard finally acknowledged in a weary voice.

The android's body suddenly became animated. "Captain, as you requested, I have reviewed all available Federation reports concerning Captain Sydell. Unfortunately, none of the findings support your observation."

Picard responded with a heavy sigh as he shifted in his chair to stare off into imaginary points in the room. "Have you tried accessing the files at Starbase Nineteen?" he asked with measurable disappointment. "That is where Sydell spent the majority of his rehabilitation."

"Those files have been sealed by the Federation Council," replied the Lieutenant.

"Sealed?" repeated Picard with amazement. He knew that Starfleet would undoubtedly seek to bury the memory of Carden Sydell, but a Federation seal?

"Yes, Captain," verified Data as he curiously observed Picard's surprise slowly transform into quiet suspicion. "Captain, may I inquire as to why you have been seeking to confirm Captain Sydell's disability?"

"It's just a hunch, Mr. Data."

Data cocked his head and expressed his interpretation of puzzlement. Above all else, the human dynamic to see beyond factual constraints impelled him to emulate them. Just as he began to process Picard's cryptic response, the door to the ready room chimed.

"Enter."

Shalayus entered the room and confronted him from across his desk. "Captain Picard, I am outraged." A security escort followed her and immediately took position near the door.

The captain eased into his chair, his casualness buffering him from the woman's hostility. "Shalayus, I am growing tired of your proclivity of showing up to my Ready Room room uninvited."

Picard's deliberate rebuff momentarily halted the woman's recrimination. She studied him for a moment before placing both hands on her hips. "And I am weary of your arrogant belief that you possess any authority over me. I demand to know why I've been assigned a security guard," she said while nodding with contempt to the young officer at attention behind her.

"Shalayus, it is for your own protection," Picard responded coolly.

The young woman's eyes narrowed, her venom moist upon her lips. "I am in no need of protection. Perhaps it is for your own protection that you fear."

The captain slowly exhaled the last of his diplomacy. "All right then," he concluded. "Frankly, I don't trust you. The more this mission unfolds, the more apparent that your agenda here is much more than that of a guide. And the thought of you having complete run on my ship only underscores my trepidation. You should be grateful that Starfleet has very explicit regulations governing the imprisonment of non-Federation diplomats, or you would have found your place in the brig."

Shalayus withdrew from her protest, softening her façade. Apparently, Picard's candidness had the opposite effect upon the Sindarian than he expected. Even Data had extrapolated a very different reaction from the young woman. "Captain, I give you my word as the daughter of a V'Dir that I pose no threat to you or your ship."

This time Picard deeply inhaled, inflating his determination. "I hope that you will understand when I tell you that I cannot afford to take

that chance. Especially when there is an increasing threat of a Romulan confrontation.”

Shalayus softly nodded her concession. “Captain, I believe that I am somewhat responsible for your mistrust,” she admitted. “Perhaps I may amend the situation by proposing an *Ah Teah La*.”

Picard returned a skeptical look. “A what?”

“It is an ancient means of negotiations on Sindar, for distrusting leaders of different didain who are often forced to bargain with the other. It is very simple and traditionally effective as long as the intentions of both parties are true to the spirit of the negotiation.”

“For what purpose?”

“I will agree to tell all that you wish to know, in exchange for my freedom.”

“Is that all?” Picard asked, expecting a list of demands that rivaled Thorin’s stipulations.

She moved away from his desk and quietly began to pace the room. “I also wish some information from you.”

Picard’s eyes squinted with suspicion. “What is the nature of this information?”

She faced him again, this time with a bright and reassuring smile. “In time, Captain. But I insist that you go first,” she offered with an outstretched hand and a bow of her head. “You are entitled to three questions at each turn.”

Picard thought for a moment before deciding upon a strategy. As he did, he probed her intently, gathering a mental baseline with which to best measure the sincerity of her responses. “Is the being who was aboard this ship truly who he claims to be?”

Shalayus nodded. “He is Zorr, the Revolver.”

“What will Zorr’s return mean to your people?” asked the captain.

Shalayus planted her feet squarely, claiming a piece of real estate in Picard’s ready room. Despite her youth, it was clear that she had some seasoning as a negotiator. “It is the moment of our history that we have awaited,” she responded. “Through Zorr, my people will be redeemed, and a new path of Becoming will be opened.”

“Is he a threat to this ship?” he asked leaning towards her.

This time Shalayus hesitated. “That depends upon your perception of a threat. You yourself possess the potential to destroy this vessel, as does he. Ah Teah La, Captain. It is my turn.”

“Proceed,” invited the captain.

It was the first time that Picard could see the resemblance to her mother, recalling his first meeting with the V’Dir on Sindar. “Tell me the history of the man you knew as Carden Sydell. I can sense some strong and negative feelings about him from your crew, especially from your First Officer.”

Picard smiled to himself. “Will Riker was a young man when the events of the *Carthain* incident transpired. His perceptions of those events have undoubtedly been influenced by his naïveté as a young Starfleet cadet.”

“Commander Riker was enrolled in Starfleet Academy for three years and twenty-one days when Carden Sydell accepted the post of captain of the *Carthain*,” interjected Data.

“Thank you, Mr. Data,” said Picard before returning to Shalayus’ pensive gaze. “Carden Sydell was a highly decorated Starfleet captain, one of the finest officers to ever command a starship. He had become a symbol for the many younger captains at the time – myself included,” he added with a smile of reminiscence. It had always seemed like a long time ago, his recollections of the past as quietly tucked away as the other mementos of his youth. Now, he freshly recalled his younger days before becoming captain of the *Enterprise*, and of the admiration he once held for Sydell.

“In 2354, nearing the height of the Cardassian war, the conflicts had grown more brutal, arousing greater public outrage. It was after the Negrain incident that Councilman Helsing, a newly appointed Representative to the Federation Council, proposed the design of the *Nemesis*-class warships. From the very beginning, the idea of Starfleet deploying a fleet of battleships sparked considerable controversy. Many Federation worlds strongly opposed the idea of military starships patrolling the quadrant. However, Helsing was an enterprising politician and successfully persuaded the Council to fund the construction of the *Nemesis*-class ships. Twenty-four months after Helsing’s initial proposal, the *Carthain*, the first *Nemesis* prototype, was commissioned and sent into the heart of the Cardassian war. Sydell was named her captain.”

Picard paused for a moment warning himself not to disclose too much to a woman whom he held in suspicion. But there was something about her eyes that impelled him to continue, something that subdued his reservations.

“Several months into the *Carthain*’s tour,” continued Picard, “the *U.S.S. Valkyrie* intercepted what it believed was a Cardassian scout ship in Federation space. The ship appeared to be preparing to fire when the *Valkyrie* opened fire and destroyed her. . It was later discovered that the *Valkyrie* had actually destroyed the *T’veve*, a Vulcan science ship. Sydell’s wife and daughter, along with the rest of the *T’veve*’s crew were lost. Despite the findings of an official investigation, Sydell blamed the crew of the *Valkyrie* for the loss of his family. During routine maneuvers near Starbase 134, Sydell intercepted the *Valkyrie* and unleashed the *Carthain*’s military might, instantly killing over two hundred of her crew.”

“Ah, despair and vengeance, they are the orphans of hope,” lamented Shalayus. “Tell me, Captain, how could such a thing occur? Lieutenant Worf explained to me that there are numerous security controls in place that limit one Federation ship’s ability to fire upon the other.”

“Yes, that’s true,” Picard acknowledged. “However, the *Carthain* was a prototype ship and wasn’t equipped with the standard checks and security protocols typically employed by a Federation vessel. In an effort to deploy the *Nemesis*-class ships into battle as early as possible, Starfleet overlooked many such safeguards. Sydell had the ability to transfer the ship’s entire weapons system under his sole command, the rest of his crew didn’t know of his plan until it was too late. Starfleet Operations suffered a significant blow after the incident.”

“What happened to Sydell?”

“He was captured and brought to trial, and eventually declared insane, suffering from a complete emotional breakdown,” answered Picard. “He spent over ten years in Starfleet’s care and finally released. He was officially reinstated shortly thereafter and has spent the last four years in limited duty. Ah Teah La.”

“Proceed,” obliged Shalayus, finally taking one of the empty chairs.

Picard began to trace his finger around the rim of his empty teacup, his casualness contrasting his solemn expression. “What would you do if Zorr ordered you to destroy this ship?” he asked, the movement of his head riding the crest of the question.

Shalayus looked at him with a blank expression, her inner thoughts unreadable. “I would take whatever action served the greater good,” she flatly stated.

Picard slowly nodded, accepting her response for the moment. “I want to know about this thing that Zorr spoke of. He referred to it as the Trujulian F’Dar. On Sindar, Creet also referred to it, calling it the ‘Hammer of God’. He believed that it was somehow tied to Wendor’s fate.”

The light behind Shalayus’ emerald eyes fractionally grew. “The power of the F’Dar is without equal. None can withstand the F’Dar’s judgment, for it is centered within the eye of contradiction where truth and deception, J’Karr and J’Kree equally revolve.”

Picard smiled a dark smile. He dismissed Shalayus’ deliberate vagueness with an exaggerated wave of his hand. “What is the Sindarian term used when an Ah Teah La fails?”

Shalayus’ face twisted with an injured expression. “Captain, I have been totally truthful with you,” she implored.

Picard neatly clasped his hands upon the desktop. “Yes, you have been truthful, but not honest. Ever since we visited Sindar, I was intrigued by a term used by the V’Dir. She made several references to a ‘Reclamation’. I have spent the last several hours reviewing Dr. Creet’s analysis of ancient Wendorian scriptures. Would you like to know what I’ve learned? According to Creet, the term is from Wendor’s eschatology. It does tell of the return of Zorr and of his promise to lead the children of Wendor into a new era. But what you failed to disclose is that his return would ignite a great battle, and it is this conflict that serves to resurrect the Wendorians to power. The scriptures foretell that the spirit of your people will rise like the Dalikor from the ashes of the vanquished. I am curious to learn who those vanquished would be.”

Shalayus’s eyes blazed with contempt as she leaped from her chair, angered by Picard’s implications. “And you suddenly believe in my people’s faith. A faith that you found so easy to dismiss,” she hissed.

“What concerns me is that you believe it. As for what I believe, I think that you have exploited the Federation. I think that you knew all along what we would encounter and used this ship to provide you with transportation. I think that you fully expected to find Zorr here and you’ve delivered the Federation’s flagship into his hands.”

“Of course, Captain,” mocked Shalayus. “Once again, I am in awe of your presumed arrogance. Do you sincerely believe that your insignificant Federation would factor so highly in Wendor’s destiny? Before your civilization had learned to even sail your oceans, my kind reigned supreme over the quadrant. And long after your kind flickers into obscurity, we will be there to mark your passing. If you think me so dangerous, why don’t you arrest me?”

“Nothing that I’ve said can be proven,” he admitted. “But if you give me the slightest provocation, I will see that you are punished to the fullest extent of Federation law,” he said, his face becoming equally threatening.

Shalayus grabbed the opposite side of the desk, anchoring herself as she leaned towards Picard, inches from his face. “Well Captain, I will play your charade if it provides you with a false sense of security. But when I grow tired of it, be fully certain that I will cast your tiresome rules and impositions aside. There is no power aboard this ship that can prevent me.”

Picard withdrew further into his chair, eclipsing the woman’s petulance with his authority. “Lieutenant, please return this woman to her quarters. She is dismissed,” he ordered as he returned his attention to the desktop monitor. Shalayus fumed, her breath marring the surface of his finely polished desk. Although he fully ignored her, he began to feel a concentrated burning sensation within his mind. The burning grew sharper, but he resisted the pain and refused to acknowledge her challenge.

With full indignation, Shalayus finally withdrew and allowed the security escort to lead her from the ready room. Even after she was gone, Picard could still feel a dull burning at the core of his mind and the afterglow of her cold and deadly stare.

Data spent several minutes quietly processing the encounter, replaying it while affording the captain time to regain his composure. Oddly, of all the emotions that he had been exposed to, he was able to

extract the most about human behavior from the underlying dynamics behind hostility. It was during these rare confrontations that humans exhibited many traits that were otherwise repressed behind their controlled exteriors. It also gave him more appreciation for the captain's authority.

"Captain, I am curious." Data finally announced.

"Yes, Mr. Data?" invited Picard while neatly setting his residual ire aside.

"It is about Captain Sydell's history," explained the android. Picard turned away from his view screen and provided the android with his full attention.

"You said that the *Valkyrie* accidentally fired upon the *T'vere* mistaking it for a Cardassian scout ship. Wouldn't the *Valkyrie*'s sensors have warned them of their error?"

"It was the *Valkyrie*'s sensors that told them it was a Cardassian ship and that it was preparing to fire," Picard inverted with full inflection. "A Federation investigation into the incident determined that the *Valkyrie*'s captain was not to blame, but that it was actually a computer malfunction."

"Captain?"

"A full diagnostic was performed upon the entire ship's computer system and sensor arrays. They were fully operational. It was just one of those unexplainable phenomena, Data, an inexplicable deviation in the computer's programming. '*A ghost in the machine*' was the official explanation. Does that concern you?"

Data considered the question before returning his attention to Picard. "No, Captain. I find the phenomenon worthy of further investigation."

"Fortunately, there aren't many incidents."

"Yes, Captain," agreed Data. "However, if the *Valkyrie*'s captain and crew were not at fault, why would Captain Sydell seek revenge upon them. It is not logical."

"I believe that logic sometimes has very little bearing on measuring the human soul," observed Picard. "Sydell was a pious man, having served Starfleet with great distinction. He devoted his entire life to upholding the principles of the Federation. I think that the loss of his wife and child filled him with a sense of betrayal, as if every ideal that he

believed in had turned against him. When he attacked the *Valkyrie*, he was attacking more than the ship, Mr. Data.”

Data paused for a moment of introspection. He nodded with understanding, although in truth he comprehended little. “Why was Captain Sydell reinstated as a Starfleet Officer and given command of another vessel after the *Carthain* incident?”

“That’s an interesting question. Many perceived Carden Sydell as another victim of the Cardassian war. Although what he did was reprehensible, a few remembered that he was once a hero.” Picard rubbed his chin with reflection. “Also, I believe that by doing so, the final chapter of a very tragic episode in Starfleet’s history was closed,” he added.

“Do you believe that Shalayus is truly a threat to this mission?”

The captain pondered the question for a moment. “One thing has been made very clear to me since we arrived upon her planet. Whatever the Sindarians are, they once belonged to a very noble and powerful race. I think that a race that has lingered so long in the shadow of the Federation may have grown envious and obsessed with the memories of what they once were and would do anything to regain what they have lost.”

Her face was still, almost serene. Riker had to admit that she looked better than he did. He rubbed his swollen eyes while suppressing a yawn. According to Dr. Crusher’s prognosis, Deanna’s condition had greatly improved. Wherever her thoughts were, she was at peace. He wished that he could share in her tranquility.

Will softly stroked Troi’s raven hair, quietly recalling a similar evening upon Betazed. Troi had drifted off then too, as a sleepless Will caressed her head while contemplating how he was going to break the news to her. How could he begin to explain his decision that he was leaving Betazed to accept a position on the *U.S.S. Potemkin*?

“I know that I made it sound easy, so neat,” he said aloud of his past plans. “But to be honest, Deanna, it was the hardest thing I had to do in my life. I figured that if I pretended that it was simple, it would have been easier upon us both. Maybe I was wrong. If we had gone into it then,

maybe it would have been easier now, having given us a sense of closure.”

He thoughtfully stroked his unshaven neck, remembering the salty spray of the Opal Sea. Life had been so uncomplicated in his youth, before there were those decisions that would cause years of regret. Maybe above all else, that’s what he missed most of all. They were both free then, unfettered from the responsibilities that maturity imposed. They could never regain what they once had, even if they were to try. They were different people now. Gone were the two idyllic youths whose dreams happened to collide in the middle of space and time.

Riker finally admitted that meeting Troi so early in his life made the opportunities of a career in Starfleet seem endless. He could never have perceived then just how truly rare she was. Little did he know that he had found in his youth what some people spend their entire lifetime searching for. What he had spent his lifetime looking for again.

He clasped her lifeless hand and rested his weary head across her breast. The smell of the Opal Sea was real now, as if he had stepped back in time. Everything from his perspective was obscured by some form of tunnel vision. But at the center of it, like the eye of the storm, was Deanna’s smiling face – so young and giving. The wind grew stronger as a rainstorm hovered over the emerald waves that crashed upon the shoreline in even intervals.

And all the while she caressed his hand.

That’s when he awoke. The sea and the storm faded into oblivion, but he still felt her touch against his hand.

“Deanna?” he called, immediately straightening his body.

“Yes, Will?” she responded, her eyes open wide, deep and twinkling. This was no dream.

“How... How do you feel?” he asked with amazement.

She looked at him with a peculiar smile. Why would anything be wrong? “I’ve never felt more at peace, Will.”

Riker smiled, his gladness overwriting the fatigue in his face. He took her hand and rubbed it against his beard. “I’m relieved. You had us worried there for a moment.”

“There was never a need to worry, Will. I was kept safe,” she said.

Will frowned, measuring her response. “Do you remember anything that happened? Anything on the planet before...before you became unconscious?”

Her smile broadened. “I remember him. He took me away from the danger. He kept me safe from the fear and pain.”

Will involuntarily withdrew from her, and from the strange feeling that grew in his chest. “Who? Who kept you from harm?”

“Zorr did of course.”

Riker rose from the chair. “You know of this Zorr?”

“Of course, Will,” she emphatically replied. “He is here to deliver us. He is the Revolver, and his first lesson is justice. *Nown es falera tay a sule.*”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Captain!” exclaimed Worf, coming to immediate attention at the entranceway of his quarters.

Picard’s face remained resolute. He quickly scanned the interior of Worf’s quarters to confirm that the Lieutenant had no guests. “May I come in for a moment, Mr. Worf?” asked Picard, maintaining a formal distance.

“Certainly, Captain,” invited the Klingon, removing himself as an obstacle.

The captain entered with a regimented demeanor. He conducted a second, more comprehensive scan of the room to ensure that Worf was indeed alone. He noted the remains of the Klingon’s breakfast scattered across the table. There had been only one place set.

The only thing that appeared out of the ordinary was a smoky residue that lingered in the air. The nearly expired candle on Worf’s table proved the most obvious source of the smell. However, the captain’s keen perceptions detected a more subtle scent underneath the smoke, of something that had been seared in the flame.

The captain turned and faced the Security Officer. Worf remained at attention near his door, mirroring Picard’s punctiliousness. “Mr. Worf, I would like to ask you some questions of a personal nature.”

The Klingon clasped his hands together behind his back, bracing himself. “Yes, Captain?”

“They’re about your relationship with Shalayus,” clarified Picard.

Worf slowly nodded with confirmation. “Yes, I thought they would be.”

For a moment, the captain eased, appearing satisfied that the first hurdle of his agenda had been passed. “I am aware that the two of you have become rather involved. Typically, I don’t make it a point of interfering with the personal relationships of my crew members. But in this instance, I am forced to make an exception.”

Worf frowned. “Captain?”

Picard's dispassion resumed. "One by one, this woman has overwhelmed the senior members of this ship," he explained, raising his voice by a fraction. "First, it was Data and Counselor Troi upon Sindar. Both Commander Riker and Dr. Crusher have also been subject to Shalayus's telepathic intrusions. Even I am forced to admit that I have unwittingly played a role in this woman's plots on several occasions. Now, she seems to have a hold upon you. And given your position as Security Officer responsible for the safety of this ship, I find this influence a cause for great concern."

"Captain, I can assure you that no matter what my personal feelings are in this matter, I am bound by my duty as an officer of this ship. My service to you and the crew is my first priority," vowed Worf.

Picard attenuated his indifference, just enough to comfort his injured officer. "Lieutenant, I wasn't questioning your integrity or your service to me. However, the Sindarians are proving to be a very cunning people. I am afraid that Shalayus may assume an advantage from her relationship with you, one that gains her some leverage over the operations of this ship."

Worf accepted Picard's consolation. "Captain, with all respect, I feel that you may have judged her too harshly. Shalayus has committed no offense. And I have seen a rare mix of strength and courage, honor and conviction within her. Surely one who is so gifted is beyond the deceptions that you suspect her of. She may hide behind a cloak of secrecy, but it is not one of deceit, Captain. I am sure of it. She has proven to me to be worthy of both honor and trust."

"Well, Lieutenant, I don't recall hearing you speak so passionately. I hope you are correct," cautioned Picard, "because in the seven days that she's been aboard the *Enterprise*, she has learned a great deal about us, about Federation protocol, and about this ship."

"And that is why you have assigned a security escort for her," concluded the Klingon.

"That's only part of the reason," confirmed the captain. "There is a much more immediate concern that I have. In my ready room, Zorr claimed that the *Leviathan* was destroyed by what he called the Trujulian F'Dar. Dr. Creet suggested that it was also responsible for Wendor's destruction. He believed that it may have been an alien invasion, based upon the references of a power that descended from the heavens.

Shalayus has made only superstitious allusions to it. She may truly know little more than her faith has remembered, or she's intentionally hiding something. Either way, if it is more than a religious reference, than this ship is in jeopardy every minute it remains in Wendor's orbit."

"What do you believe it to be?" asked Worf.

"I'm not sure, Lieutenant," Picard answered letting his own frustration tarnish his response. "It could very well be a technologically advanced race of beings that we have never encountered before, as Creet suggested. At this moment they could be hiding in cloaked vessels behind Wendor's moons, preparing to destroy any trespassers who threaten their territory."

Worf frowned. He loathed to retreat but could not deny that a more defensive posture would be prudent given the circumstances. "Perhaps it would be best to move the ship to a more secure location," he advised.

"I wish it was that simple," Picard submitted. "Whatever this F'Dar is, it possesses the power to utterly destroy a Federation vessel in a matter of seconds. What will happen to the balance of power within this quadrant if the Romulan's discover its secrets?"

Worf scowled at his conclusion. Either way, the *Enterprise* had been placed in a very compromised position. As head of ship Security, Worf was angered. As a father, he was thankful that Alexander was visiting his adoptive grandparents on Earth.

"Crusher to Captain Picard," paged the doctor.

"Yes, Beverly," responded Picard.

"I think that you should come to sickbay immediately."

Picard frowned. "Trouble?"

Beverly paused for a moment before responding. "I'm not sure," she vaguely replied. "It's Deanna. She's conscious."

"Does she remember anything about what happened to Officer McCaley?" asked the captain.

"I think it would be best if you come here and see for yourself."

Deanna's face was bright and serene, so serene in fact that Picard couldn't help but match her warm smile. However, her cheer was

contradicted by the grim faces of Riker and Crusher who stood upon either side of the young woman, framing her joy with their gravity.

“Hello, Captain. Hello, Worf,” greeted Troi, her eyes dancing as she met their respective attention.

“How are you feeling, Counselor?” inquired Picard taking an additional step closer to the bed.

“I’m fine,” she assured. “I feel well rested and ready to return to duty.”

Picard nodded encouragingly. Deanna appeared to be her old self. Gone were the traces of fatigue that had plagued her since their journey on Sindar. She was as fresh and as carefree as she was during her recent birthday celebration in Ten-Forward.

“Excellent,” endorsed Picard. “Your service to this ship has been sorely missed. Tell me, Deanna, do you recall anything of your visit to Wendor? Anything that might help us to understand what happened to Ensign McCaley?”

She shook her head, regulating the wave of sorrow that suddenly overcame her. “Yes, Captain, I remember everything. It was the Huundhraeyl that murdered him.”

Picard’s smile dimmed. “What do you know of this Huundhraeyl?”

Deanna’s eyes became darker as a cloud trespassed over her face. “He is the shadow of hope, a feral beast whose soul is despair,” she declared. “He is the ghost of failed wisdom that shuns enlightenment. He is a paradox, but within the eye of contradiction stands truth. *‘Ah petsura likara, ah simboliss du’.*”

All traces of the captain’s elation vanished as his frown suddenly matched those of his First Officer and the doctor. He withdrew from Deanna for a moment, allowing himself to share a quick confirmation with the solemn pair. Picard could even sense that Worf’s breathing had quickened, as the first threshold of his Klingon’s instincts warned him of something unnatural and potentially dangerous nearby.

“Who taught you those words?” Picard asked pointedly.

“J’Conan Zorr, Captain. It is he who saved me, kept me safe and far from the Huundhraeyl’s reach. *‘D’assoria frunada taniqiwa’.*”

“Deanna, tell me everything that you know of this Zorr,” Picard asked. Although his tone appeared casual, his face belied his concern.

Troi's face returned to its original calm. "Zorr is the Revolver, the adjudicator. He is the harbinger of truth, and the deliverer of our salvation. 'And the storm shall pass and the age of enlightenment shall follow'."

"What is she saying?" asked Crusher.

"She speaks from the Shurill Thore. They are the scriptures that form the basis of my faith," announced a new voice at the entrance of the intensive-care ward.

Picard turned to meet the newcomer. The figure stood at the sickbay's entrance, at the exact spot where the light was most dim; the soft lighting barely revealing the face. But the eyes that glowed with a mysterious green fire revealed their identity.

"Shalayus, why are you here?" demanded Picard. "And where is Ensign Halloway?"

The young security officer stepped from behind the shadows. He offered a quick but formal nod to the captain and Worf.

"I am here, because I sensed that my presence would be of use," she offered.

"How does Deanna know your language, your scriptures?" demanded Riker, his implication as direct as his dislike for the woman. But Shalayus ignored him, deeming his question beneath her response. Instead, she studied the Counselor with growing apprehension.

"Perhaps her trauma coupled with her empathic abilities somehow has given her the capacity to tap into memories of Wendor's history," suggested Dr. Crusher, trying to fill the void left by Shalayus' silence.

"*Ni la son pi seara, Wendira-kahn,*" greeted Troi, brightly smiling though her eyes soon filled with scorn for the younger woman.

Shalayus defiantly paced passed the captain and Worf, answering Troi's challenge with the cold stare of her narrowed eyes. "*Pi seara an ne, ati-shan,*" she reciprocated, coolly watching as Troi propped herself upon her elbows, preparing for a confrontation.

"Shalayus, I demand to know what has happened to my officer," insisted Picard.

Shalayus ignored his question as well, concentrating her efforts on measuring the threat of Troi's new persona. Picard watched the two women face off with peculiar fascination. Shalayus warily advanced

towards Troi's bed, stalking the Counselor. In response, Deanna hissed with warning, causing the Sindarian to momentarily withdraw.

Troi sneered with a clear sense of victory.

At first Picard was almost relieved to witness the confrontation. He had automatically assumed that given Troi's sudden affinity with Wendor, that the two women would have become allies and the potential of their collaboration in undermining his control of the ship filled him with trepidation.

Shalayus approached the biobed and rested a careful hand upon Troi's head. Crusher began to protest this unauthorized interference to her patient, but Picard stayed her objections with a nod of consent.

Troi's placid face suddenly twisted with anger. She withdrew from Shalayus and struck her, knocking the Sindarian to the floor. Worf immediately leaped between them, using his body to shield Shalayus from further violence.

"*J'lyle Kuuzaad!* Infidel! Captain, this woman is a traitor," shouted Troi.

"What do you mean?" demanded Picard.

"She is a heretic. She seeks only to gain control of this ship. She must be stopped before she undermines the Revolver's promise to deliver us. Stop her now or she will destroy us all," pleaded Troi.

Shalayus lifted herself from the floor, rejecting Worf's efforts to assist her. She ignored Troi's accusations and instead faced the captain. A small stream of blood flowed freely from her mouth, but she ignored it.

"Captain, Counselor Troi must be kept sedated," she advised with detached calm. "The Huundhraeyl has a hold upon her. It hears what she hears, sees what she sees. With her empathic ability, it even knows what we think and feel. Every moment that she is awake, it learns more about us, about our dreams and fears."

Deanna hissed. "She lies, it is her deception that she seeks to protect," cursed Troi. "Don't believe her, Captain. Shun her, for her heart is of midnight and despair is the blood that flows in her veins."

"Picard don't be a fool," berated Shalayus with mounting anger. "The Huundhraeyl is laughing at you for every moment that you hesitate. If you don't, all will be lost. If we fail here, it will be the first loss in an irrevocable succession that leads to the end of all things."

The Captain returned an unimpressed expression, his eyes filled with accusation. Troi's allegations had not gone ignored. "Ensign Halloway," he ordered without releasing Shalayus from the judgment of his stare. "Please return our guest to her quarters."

Halloway marched forward and politely offered Shalayus the lead. She shut her eyes for a minute, sensing defeat. She struggled to remain silent, realizing that any further protest would only serve to reaffirm the captain's suspicions.

With a heavy sigh, Shalayus acquiesced. She summoned the remainder of her pride, resigning herself that this small defeat was insignificant compared to what was truly at stake. She would deal with this trifling setback at another time, focusing her attention instead upon her mission.

Shalayus accepted Halloway's offer and turned first to leave the facility.

"*Mithyrial – trisina en ryy a'dir,*" gloated Troi to the departing figure.

It was then that Shalayus froze.

In one fluid motion she raised her right arm directly above her head in command. In a flash, Halloway's phaser flew from the belt of the unsuspecting Ensign. It soared through the air, coming to rest in Shalayus's outstretched hand. A moment later she turned, her arm arcing downward to the exact coordinates that yielded the shortest distance between the weapon and Troi.

As her finger touched the phaser's trigger, a second shadow leaped into the air. Worf dove at Shalayus, bringing her to the ground before the weapon could be discharged.

"Utsa Lia, no!" cried Shalayus as she fell. But she knew that it was in vain.

Picard rushed over as Worf rose to his feet.

"Lieutenant, arrest this woman immediately and place her into custody," he roared.

When projected to its current size, akreon's molecular model looked like a mythic beast. It slowly revolved around its Y-axis, its

myriad of limbs appearing to hungrily reach out in all directions of the holodeck. If it was more than a projection, it would cast an intricate shadow that would rival the arachnid webs of Gelnohst V.

Geordi found himself pacing in a perfect circle, directly underneath the revolving object. His hopes that a new perspective would shed some light upon the mystery were quickly dwindling. The twenty or so limbs suddenly seemed like swollen fingers dancing in the air, reducing him to a simple marionette being pulled by invisible wires to the amusement of the uncaring shape.

In all, there were two hundred and thirty-seven spherical objects joined by simple rods. Each sphere was designated by one of eighty-four possible colors, each one representing a separate atomic element. So simple, so precise and yet so daunting.

By themselves the individual spheres poised no mystery, but the complexity derived from their union was staggering. Geordi had gained a new respect for the enigmatic Bordenins over the last three hours. They were the only race since the Wendorians to devise such a complex substance.

And there, nearly at the center of the model was also the center of the controversy. The unique association of beryllium, trunide and hydrogen formed the nexus of the akreon compound. It was near the model's heart where the secrets of the akreon's abilities beat, possessing the capacity to elevate and decay. To empower and to diminish.

It also hindered the *Enterprise's* efforts to see past Wendor's illusions.

By contrast, the rest of the holodeck was sparse. A simple table, two chairs and a large drawing board were all that were programmed. Geordi turned away from the giant model and reviewed the handwritten notes upon the board. All of the writing was his, as Data did not need to organize his thoughts in such a rudimentary fashion.

At each distinct area, his writing began with bold and deliberate strokes. However, towards the conclusion of each, they were reduced to thin scrawls of unfinished thoughts. He could only now make out about half of what he had written.

Meanwhile, Data had been testing his assumptions with the assistance of the ship's computer. None of them had led to any meaningful conclusion, or even the promise of one. Geordi thought that

there was something peculiar about Data. If the Chief Engineer didn't know better, he would have guessed that the android was distracted.

"Data, I just don't know," relinquished Geordi with an exaggerated sigh. "We've been at this for hours and we're just not getting anywhere."

Data quickly adopted an opposing expression. "That is not true, Geordi," he countered. "We have determined that if we can find a method of dividing the molecular bond, then we would be successful in eliminating the akreon's adverse effects."

"But Data, that's not going to help us reconfigure the sensor array," argued LaForge. "We're no closer to finding a solution than we are at understanding the problem. All we've learned is that if we break it down, it no longer exists. I didn't need to spend three hours in a holodeck to figure that out."

Data appeared to empathize with LaForge's frustration. "It is important to remember that the effort holds the same value as the accomplishment. Those who judge a deed without knowing the motivation will soon be judged themselves. ."

Geordi turned away with restraint. He was growing increasingly tired of Data's recent habit of indiscriminately spouting proverbs. "Whatever you say."

LaForge drifted off while absently staring into the oversized akreon model. He was tired and feeling particularly frustrated.

"Data, is there any way that we could configure the sensors to actually integrate with the akreon?" Geordi proposed, momentarily setting aside his fatigue. "I mean, instead of trying to go through it or around it, perhaps we could devise a way to allow the signal to actually make use of the akreon."

Data pondered the possibility for just over four seconds. "It is an interesting concept," he agreed, "but I do not believe that it would work. As the trunide decayed, it would inhibit high resolution EM scanning."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," conceded Geordi.

"Geordi, may I ask you something?" Data asked.

"Sure, Data."

Data hesitated for a moment. "Do you feel that by serving Starfleet you are best serving your moral truths?"

Geordi shrugged. “Moral truths? Data, what’s gotten into you?” he asked. “Don’t tell me this is about your crazy holodeck program again. Is it?”

“Yes, it is, Geordi,” replied Data “It has told me that the truth of humans is ephemeral and that the only truth that there can be is with God.”

“And now you are wondering if being a Starfleet officer is against God’s truth?” deduced LaForge.

“Yes,” confirmed Data. “Perhaps we are trespassing when we journey through space. Maybe humans were never meant to venture this far. I have considered the possibility that the conflict here is the first punishment for humanity’s disobedience. We may be witnessing the first events of the Day of Judgment.”

Geordi shook his head in opposition. “Data, as your friend, I’m telling you to erase that program,” he urged. “Listen to yourself! If God or whatever is out there didn’t want us here, then why did they give us the ability to dream and enough intelligence to transform that vision to reality? What you’re suggesting is that humans resign themselves to living in caves and wait to die.”

“*‘The simpler the life, the greater the pleasure’*,” Data recited. “Perhaps technology is the greatest of all human sins.”

LaForge raised his hands, impeding the strength of Data’s remarks until he had enough patience to absorb them. “Data, do you even realize what you’re saying?” Geordi asked. “Without technology, you would have never been created. Without technology the human race would have become easy slaves for creatures like the Romulans, or the Borg. The more we venture out into space the more we understand, and the more we understand the more we learn to act morally. Before space exploration, think of the wars, the violence, and the petty greed that plagued humanity. It was only when we ventured into the unknown that we discovered just how noble a race we could be. Without technology, these things would never have happened.”

“Without technology, there would be no weapons, no wars,” Data reciprocated. “If there was no technology, no race would be able to enslave another.”

“History is filled with exploitation,” disputed LaForge. “Ours, the Romulans, the Klingons, everyone’s. Don’t blame those atrocities on

technology. Technology has only given cruelty the opportunity to manifest itself on the universe, but cruelty began long before technology came along.”

“I find myself reflecting upon the story of Captain Sydell. Had there not been a computer error aboard the *Valkyrie*, his wife and daughter, and the rest of the *T'vere*'s crew would not have been lost.”

“Data, don't blame technology,” Geordi replied in a calmer tone, finally understanding Data's motivation. The error aboard the *Valkyrie* and the realization that even computers could sometimes be imperfect caused a fundamental re-examination into the android's sense of self. “Had we not been at war with the Cardassians, there would not have been a need to fire upon any ship. And if Councilman Helsing was as concerned about prematurely sending a prototype warship into battle as he was with advancing his political career, the *Nemesis*-class ships would have never given Sydell the ability to do what he did.”

“I understand your point of view. Thank you, Geordi.”

LaForge sighed with relief. “Good. Let's take a break, I'm hungry.”

Data reflected for a moment. “Geordi, before we go, I would you like to show you my program.”

LaForge hesitated. “Data, I don't know,” he answered with clear unwillingness.

“I would respect your opinion.”

Geordi sighed again, this time with reluctance. “Okay, just for a minute,” he conceded.

Data turned his face to the ceiling of the holodeck. “Computer, please save current program and execute program Data-Entity-Zero-Two-Seven.”

“Affirmative,” obeyed the computer.

A moment later, Geordi found himself standing in absolute darkness. At the center of the holodeck, a strange luminous mist began to grow. A vortex appeared over the mist and began to spiral, its groping tendrils joining with the mist until the entire room was overcome by its dark orange glow.

At the core of the aberrant tempest, two fiery eyes appeared.

“The colossus sleeps...”

“Data, what is that?”

“It is a weighted average extrapolating all the available data from Federation records regarding the properties of a divine entity.”

Within the shroud of mist, a hideous face appeared. “The colossus sleeps with the slumber of a thousand centuries,” it echoed. “Soon, eternity will be lifted from its brow and the dreamer will awake. Soon its image shall cast the galaxy in shadow.”

“What is it saying?” LaForge asked.

“Silence!” commanded the voice. “From the spine of the shadow, the heretic’s cradle shall be carved. Perdition’s soliloquy shall thy lullaby be.”

Geordi shook his head with opposition. “Data, I don’t know what that is, or what you’ve programmed it to be, but that creature has nothing to do with anything that could be considered divine. You really want my advice? Erase the program.” Geordi dismissed his objection with a simple wave of his hand. “C’mon, I’m hungry. Let’s go to Ten-Forward,” he suggested.

Data’s eyes remained transfixed upon the distorted apparition. “Thank you, Geordi,” he responded. “However, I do not require any sustenance. I will stay here and await your return.”

LaForge raised his brow. For a moment it appeared he was going to say something more but then decided against it. Instead, he simply turned his back upon the strange spectacle and headed for the exit, shaking his head a final time before he left.

Once Geordi departed, Data’s full concentration returned to his program. He stared into the scintillating glow, clearing all other thoughts from his positronic network, one memory partition at a time.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Riker marched into the observation lounge with an unusually quiet Data in tow. The First Officer was grateful for Data's newly acquired reticence, as he was clearly in no mood for idle conversation. He was exhausted and it showed.

Since leading the away team's expedition to Wendor, Riker afforded himself only a few brief intervals of rest. At first, his sacrifice allowed him to keep vigil over Deanna, as she lay in a chrysalis of hibernation. Now he couldn't sleep, couldn't suspend his foreboding over Troi's metamorphosis long enough to slip into unconscious oblivion.

It wasn't Deanna's sudden fluency in Wendor's language or intimate comprehension of its scriptures that filled the First Officer with misgiving. It was the way that she automatically dismissed him with the singularity of her conviction. Deanna had become a stranger, selectively eliminating him with the myopia of her new faith. Whatever bond between them that had survived over the last thirteen years was gone.

Will also hated to admit that he found himself wondering if Shalayus was right after all. Maybe Troi was being manipulated by this thing that the Sindarians called the Huundhraeyl, the same malevolent entity that she claimed was responsible for the mysterious deaths upon the planet. But Shalayus remained in custody and Captain Picard wouldn't even acknowledge her.

The First Officer slowed his gait as he suddenly questioned his unexpected defense of the young woman. A few hours ago, he would have applauded the captain's decision to confine Shalayus. Perhaps even the brig with its restraining fields was not enough of a deterrent for Shalayus's telepathic influence. Even now she could be exerting her power, probing his fatigued mind as she sought a new advocate.

With a heavy breath, he discarded all thoughts of her from his mind.

As difficult as the last few days were for the First Officer, Riker empathized with Picard's dilemma. The captain was no closer to learning the fate of the missing scientists, or of the culprit behind the *Leviathan's* destruction, and in the balance stood the seeming inevitability of a

galactic war with the Romulans, a war that would plunge the quadrant into chaos.

The brunt of the last few days did not go unnoticed upon Picard's face. But what Riker found more visible was the captain's distance. It was typical for Picard to maintain a regimented demeanor during a demanding mission. But the captain's recent reticence was from more than the usual strain.

Picard ignored the pair as they entered the lounge. Instead, the captain stared out of one of the room's oversized windows. His eyes danced to the brisk tempo of his internal calculations, as he thoughtfully stroked his chin. The vermilion glow of the planet outside shed an optimistic nimbus upon him. The captain had learned something that helped to simplify the equation of Wendor's mysteries.

"Will, how's Deanna doing?" asked Picard, pausing from his thoughts to greet the First Officer.

"Resting comfortably, Captain," reported Riker with a reassuring nod.

"How's her condition?"

"Unchanged," Will said. "She's waiting to return to duty."

"Understood," Picard acknowledged, appreciating his First Officer's implication. "Until Dr. Crusher can assure me that she is not under the influence of an alien consciousness, she's to stay confined to sickbay."

Will nodded as the captain took position in front of the nearest wall viewer display. Picard gestured his two officers to the closest chairs on either side of the enormous table, as he prepared to discuss the purpose for the impromptu meeting.

"Captain, have the findings of your research led to a significant conclusion?" anticipated Data.

"Yes, they have, Mr. Data," answered Picard. "Unfortunately, it is not much to go on. But if my hunch proves correct, then it may yield us a much-needed advantage."

Riker and Data shared their optimism across the table. "I've been reviewing the available files concerning Carden Sydell," the captain explained for Riker's benefit. "Curiously, many of the files have been sealed by the Federation Council. During the initial investigation of the *Carthain* incident, the Freign Commission conducted a closed session

where Sydell gave his deposition. The actual recordings of those proceedings are classified, but I was fortunate enough to obtain a small segment of it. It took some doing,” he said with full understatement.

Picard took position just behind Riker, removing himself from the view screen. “Computer, playback the preselected sequence,” he instructed.

Within a moment, the image flashed across the viewer. Riker immediately recognized the location. It was the Federation Council Hall. At the head of an immense dais sat Thren Freign, the special attaché to the Federation President, appointed to lead the investigation into the *Carthain* incident and Sydell’s alleged mutiny.

From the shadows, Sydell emerged and methodically approached the Council floor. He was flanked on either side by two security officers, his hands bound by restraining cuffs.

The faces of the Commission gazed upon the tattered figure with a mix of fear and disdain. Sydell had been a hero, and now their reaction to his heresy was one of equal but opposite emotion.

He was a killer, but under the unflattering light of the immense hall, Sydell seemed more of a pariah. It was not until he stepped directly under the beacon that his dark eyes became visible, eyeing the Council with contempt.

Watching Sydell stand before the Council filled Riker with a strong sense of omen. If Zorr was granted an audience with the Federation, then this moment in history would be repeated. In a single instant the past and future would be in conjunction, as if their lives revolved upon a circular plane, intersecting the same point in time.

“Cast into the shadows from the favor of thy light...” challenged Sydell, his voice rising like an ocean crest.

“Computer, hold the image!” ordered Picard. “Did you see that?” he asked as he returned to the foreground, momentarily eclipsing the frozen image of Sydell. Riker turned to Data with a mystified expression, hoping that the android had an answer for the captain. He did not.

Picard frowned with disappointment and returned to the screen. “Computer, loop the last seven seconds of the playback.” The image reset to the moment when Sydell marched towards the Commission across the immense floor of the Hall.

“Cast into the shadows from the favor of thy light..., Cast into the shadows from the favor of thy light..., Cast into the shadows from the favor of thy light...,” echoed Sydell.

Picard raised his right hand. “Computer, mute audio,” he implored. The scene continued to replay in silence. Finally, Data’s face registered understanding.

“Captain Sydell is limping,” declared the android.

“Exactly!”

“Captain, I still don’t understand,” admitted Riker. “What does Sydell’s limp have to do with what’s happening here?”

“During my first encounter with Zorr in my ready room, I observed a trace of a limp in his right leg,” explained Picard. “At the time, it struck me as peculiar although I couldn’t fully explain why. Then it occurred to me. If Zorr is truly a divine spirit, one who is simply inhabiting Sydell’s persona, why would he exhibit the same injury?” Picard asked, but Riker’s face remained perplexed. “Think of it, Zorr had the ability to rescue me from death with a simple wave of his hand. I find it compelling that he would retain Sydell’s physical disability.”

“I wasn’t even aware that Sydell had a limp,” noted Will.

“Nor I,” added the captain. “There is no evidence that Sydell was impaired, until now. His medical records before he accepted his post aboard the *Carthain* make no mention of it. The fact that this footage is the first indication of it, leads me to assume that it was from an injury sustained during his capture.”

“Then you don’t believe that he really is Zorr,” concluded the First Officer.

Picard shook his head once. “No, rather I doubt Zorr’s claim that Sydell is truly dead. Perhaps this limp is an indication that some dormant residue of Sydell still exists. If this hypothesis is true, then it may be to our advantage. We may be able to find some way of reaching him.”

“Captain, do you believe that Zorr is a threat to this mission, and that his offer to bring salvation to the Federation is a lie?” asked Data.

Picard shrugged. “I’m not sure,” he replied. “If Zorr’s claims prove untrue, then I want to make certain that we are able to deal with that contingency before we consider bringing him to the Federation Council.”

Data nodded and instead of pressing the issue, turned his attention inward. His face acquired a blank stare that indicated he was momentarily retrieving and processing some archived file. An instant later and his face became bright. "Computer, please playback the sequence in its entirety with the audio restored," he requested.

"Data?"

"Captain, I believe that I am familiar with the words that Captain Sydell spoke before the Freign Commission."

The image of Sydell stalking the Commission repeated, his raven eyes glistening.

"Cast into the shadows from the favor of thy light. I vow to assail thee with my heart's despite."

"Computer, end playback," instructed Data. "Captain Sydell is reciting a verse from the Selcor of Vran." Picard frowned as he scanned his memory with less success than Data.

"The Selcor is an ancient book comprising the mythology of the Vran," Data explained. "I learned of it while I was conducting research into the various religions within the Federation. That particular stanza is from the 'Lay of Mandred'. According to the Selcor, Mandred was the first King of Vran. After Mandred's only son was killed during an attack by a warring tribe, he was left without an heir. Mandred blamed G'Nor, the divine creator of the Vran for the loss of his son, vowing an eternity of revenge. It is believed that Mandred's despair made him immortal and that he is responsible for every ill that plagues the Vran."

Will shook his head. "Captain, have you considered the possibility that even if we find a way to reach Sydell, he may be more of a threat than Zorr? Especially if he still holds the Federation accountable for the loss of his family."

Picard turned away and continued to stroke his chin while staring at the planet beneath him. "Mr. Data, I have a project for you."

"Yes, Captain."

"I want you to find a way to break the Federation Council's seal on Captain Sydell's confidential records," announced Picard. "We need to learn whatever we can before we attempt to reach any memory of him that still exists. If anyone can crack the computer encryption, you can."

"But Captain, even attempting such an action is punishable by a mandatory court-martial," reminded the android.

“I am well aware of that,” Picard assured. “As your commanding officer, I will take full responsibility if we are discovered. But if my suspicions prove correct, once we uncover the truth, no one will dare charge us.”

Data reflected upon the captain’s unusual request. Such an illicit action was in violation of his core programming to uphold Federation law, superseded only by extraordinary circumstances.

“Mr. Data, I understand that my request may pose a difficulty to you,” Picard said, sensing the android’s conflict. “I wouldn’t ask you unless I believed that it was vital to the success of this mission and the security of the Federation,” he persuaded.

“I understand, Captain.”

“Alas, I should have anticipated your inherent mistrust of me,” lamented a voice from the opposite end of the lounge. It immediately summoned the attention of the three officers, who turned in unison to face the speaker. “How ironic that a society that prides itself upon embracing the unknown, automatically holds it under suspicion’s light. If only you understood your own peril.”

“Zorr, I would appreciate you informing me before you decide to visit my ship uninvited,” scolded Picard.

Zorr faced him with grieving eyes. “The last time I visited your ship uninvited, you appeared more grateful,” he reminded. “I have come here today to learn when I will meet with your Federation’s leaders.”

Picard raised both eyebrows. “I have not yet informed them of your request.”

Zorr face clearly reflected his disappointment as he paced the room towards them. “I am sorely displeased Captain,” he said. He took a deep breath as the calm returned to his face. “Yet I also understand your dilemma. The Federation Council will inevitably ask you for your assessment of me, and you remain uncertain of my intentions. How may I prove myself to you?”

“You could begin by explaining the nature of the Trujulian F’Dar to me,” Picard said.

The robed figure halted and returned a scowl. “Of all the questions that you have the opportunity to ask me, you chose to ask about the F’Dar,” he mocked. “I present you with the keys to understanding existence, and all you can see is substance and not the essence. Pray that

I am not too late for your kind, Captain,” his eyes burned with warning. “The F’Dar is the greatest of all of Wendor’s technological creations, it is an instrument of vast power, unlike any in the galaxy.”

“The F’Dar is a weapon,” Picard darkly concluded.

“The F’Dar is no weapon!” reproved Zorr. “You still perceive with the limited intellect of your ancient progenitors who searched the savannas armed with rocks and sticks. The F’Dar is an instrument, a tool, not a weapon. The being that commands it determines its impact upon existence,” he explained before turning, his expression softening. “For a time, it was also my home.”

“Your home?” echoed Picard.

“Yes, Captain. When I returned to Wendor a millennium ago, I grieved over the loss of my people. As time passed, my physical body degenerated until it withered into nothingness. Within the F’Dar, my spirit found sanctuary. It preserved me for the centuries that followed.”

“The scriptures of ancient Wendor suggest that you are the harbinger of war,” confronted Picard.

Zorr laughed loudly, dismissing the implication. “Captain Picard, if I had wanted you dead, why would I have saved your life? The only war that I bring is the war against the unenlightened.”

“J’Conan, what will you tell the Federation Council if they agree to meet with you?” asked Data.

The dark figure enjoyed an enigmatic smile. “I will deliver the truth unto them.”

“Zorr, I will be reporting to my superiors within the hour, to update them with the status of this mission,” said the Captain. “I will inform them of your presence and of your request to meet with them.”

“Very good,” Zorr endorsed. “I will await their response,” he said.

His body began to flicker as a mysterious silver light soon enveloped him. “In the meantime, Captain. I will prepare a demonstration of the F’Dar for you,” he promised above the frenzy.

“You will be my messenger.”

In an instant, the silver light flashed and Zorr was gone. The captain extended his uncertainty to his two officers before returning to the viewer. For a moment, he allowed his gaze to linger upon the shimmering image of Wendor before turning to Data.

“Mr. Data, I am curious,” he said. “Why did you ask Zorr what he would do if he met with the Council?”

Data reflected for a long moment before responding. Once again, his expression appeared to lapse, momentarily shifted by the protocols of his command hierarchy. But as the moments passed, it became clear that it was something more, some other embedded sub-routine that momentarily replaced his consciousness.

“It is God’s will that we understand the nature of our sins and the price of redemption.” he said.

Riker shared his unspoken concern with the captain, and Picard nodded his confirmation. Whatever else was happening, Data’s behavior was becoming increasingly suspect. The captain recalled his earlier meeting with the android, when Data unveiled the nature of his holodeck experiment. Picard had concluded that Data, like most sentient beings, had begun exploring religion in order to rationalize phenomena that transcended a secular explanation.

Now, Picard was convinced that the android’s motivations had become less clear. As this mission became more puzzling, Data’s ability to clearly comprehend the events on his own diminished inversely.

“Mr. Data, before you begin your shift tomorrow, please meet me in my ready room.”

The captain had just finished changing into his sleepwear when Worf hailed him over the communication system. Before responding, Picard finished folding his uniform, removing the gold communicator pin and placing it upon his end table. It was still warm. He had been wearing his uniform for over eighteen hours. Picard was ready for sleep, but knew that Worf’s message couldn’t be avoided. He already knew what the Lieutenant would report.

“Yes, Worf,” he answered.

“Captain, I have Admiral Peldin on subspace,” informed the Klingon.

Picard nodded to himself with resolve. This wasn’t a conversation that he was looking forward to having. Besides being a commanding

officer, he considered the admiral a friend. “Please redirect it to my quarters.”

“Yes, Captain,” obeyed Worf.

Picard approached his desktop terminal and hesitated before turning it on. It wasn’t every day that he exposed himself to disciplinary action.

“Jean-Luc, I hope that I am not disturbing you,” said Peldin, taking note of Picard’s attire. The admiral exhibited his typically cool expression, but his swift response to Picard’s report belied his intrigue.

“No, Admiral,” Picard replied. “In fact, I was anticipating your transmission.”

Peldin eyed Picard’s curious tone with an approximating glance, before dismissing it. “Well, I’ve reviewed your briefing, what the hell is happening out there?”

“You know as much as I do at the moment.”

“Any additional intelligence on this F’Dar? Have you learned anything of its technology?” Peldin asked.

“Nothing,” said the captain. “As I have already indicated, the akreon in Wendor’s atmosphere inhibits all but a fundamental scan of the planet.”

Peldin shrugged off his disappointment. “Have the Romulans attempted any further communications?”

“They have been unusually quiet. It’s all there in my report,” Picard curtly reminded.

This time, Peldin wasn’t so forgiving. He held the captain in the reprimand of his irritated expression, before allowing the moment to pass. “This whole business about Sydell...” he said as he reclined into his chair. “It brings back a lot of bad memories.”

“I’m sure that it does,” Picard agreed with a hint of insinuation. “His reappearance prompted me into doing some research about his past. I learned some very interesting things.”

Peldin’s aloof demeanor quickly pivoted. Although his eyes remained calm, the admiral’s momentary withdrawal signaled his disquiet. “Such as?” he asked, trying his best to discount his anxiety.

“At the time of the *Carthain* incident, you were considered Helsing’s protégée,” said Picard. “I wasn’t aware that you two even knew each other back then. What’s even more interesting is that you gave the

authorization to release Sydell from care and reinstate him as a Starfleet officer.”

“What’s your point, Picard?”

“I’ve had a difficult time understanding why Sydell was given a captain’s chair,” Picard continued. “Reinstating him into service is one thing, but a captain? I find the whole affair rather engaging.”

Peldin scowled under a knotted brow. “Listen Picard, the whole *Nemesis*-class proposal sparked some very heated debate, long before construction even began. I don’t have to remind you of the political backlash that ensued. Virtually every representative of the Federation accused Starfleet of abusing Federation funds to quietly rebuild the war machine that had been so carefully dismantled after the Klingon treaties,” he recalled as he shifted in his chair. “Hell, the ink wasn’t dry on the first significant trade agreements with the Klingons when the *Nemesis* plans were publicly disclosed. They accused the Federation of constructing them to maintain martial control over their empire.”

“I don’t need a lesson in history, Admiral,” Picard brewed. “My primary concern is Carden Sydell and what impact his return has upon this mission and my ship.”

“The unexplainable computer error aboard the *Valkyrie* that resulted in the destruction of the *T’veve* was a bad enough blow to Starfleet. But what Sydell did... What the *Carthain* gave him the ability to do,” the admiral conceded after a visible effort, “fueled a political backlash unlike Starfleet had ever seen. The long-term effects of the Freign Commission upon Starfleet Operations are immeasurable. For the first time Starfleet Command became accountable directly to the Federation Council with audits and independent verifications. Fourteen years after the incident and Starfleet is still bearing the political fallout.”

“So, Sydell is released from care, ready or not, and returned to a token commission,” concluded the captain. “And in the process, the last blemish on Helsing’s political record is swept under the rug. How terribly convenient, Admiral.”

“Jean-Luc, it’s not like that,” Peldin defended. “If you’re suggesting...”

“What I’m suggesting, Admiral,” attacked Picard, “is that fourteen years ago, Starfleet unleashed the *Carthain*, its most destructive weapon into battle, without the necessary security checks and balances.

As a direct result, the fate of the *Valkyrie* remains one of the greatest tragedies that has ever rocked Starfleet. And now, you've released one of Starfleet's fiercest warriors from an asylum, minus the checks and balances of sanity. Once again, he has control over one of the deadliest technologies ever encountered. How history repeats itself, Admiral. I can only hope that the *Enterprise* fares better than the *Valkyrie*."

Peldin sat emotionlessly in his chair for a long time, silently studying the angered captain. As the moments passed, he slowly regained his authority, his command inflating within his eyes. Finally, Peldin leaned towards the viewer, his rank magnified upon Picard's tiny view screen. "Picard, have you received a promotion that I was not notified of?"

"Admiral?"

"I am trying to understand why you suddenly felt empowered to judge the actions of a senior officer. Your orders, Picard, are to secure this Hammer of God at all costs from Romulan appropriation. If it has the ability to destroy a Federation ship in seconds, we need to get our hands upon it. Once it is secured, a team of analysts will be assigned to study it. The Federation considers the protection of this machine to be your highest priority."

Picard wasn't so easily subdued. "I can't wait to learn what Councilman Helsing will do once he obtains technology that makes the *Carthain* seem like a slingshot by comparison."

Peldin raised his right hand to Picard in stern warning. "That's enough, Jean-Luc. If you want to debate history, I welcome the opportunity when you return to Earth. Until then, you are a Starfleet officer, and you have your orders. Keep me informed. Peldin out."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Shalayus remained poised in her confinement. She sat motionlessly at the edge of her bunk, deep in meditation. The detention area was virtually inhospitable by her standards, but she withheld her protest. In fact, since being placed in custody she refrained from any kind of communication at all. For over twenty-four hours, she sat in complete silence, closing her eyes to insulate herself from the outside world. The young woman even managed to ignore the security officer assigned to secure the brig, despite his best efforts to strike a conversation with the indignant woman.

The captain had ordered Ensign Sparr to inform him of anything unusual. Although the silent figure met Sparr's criteria of unusual, she had done nothing that warranted the captain's attention. Actually, she did nothing to warrant anyone's attention.

The door to the facility opened and Worf entered the area. "I am here to relieve you, Ensign," informed the Klingon. Sparr nodded obediently and exited the room, grateful to be away from the dormant woman. As the sound of the door closed behind him, the brig's silence loomed between the two remaining occupants.

"Shalayus, I would like to speak with you," announced Worf stepping closer to her cell.

The young woman remained as stone.

Worf scowled. "Shalayus, I know that you can hear me," he said raising his voice to offset her neglect. "I am here to listen to the justification for your actions yesterday."

For a moment, she continued her silence, giving no indication that she was conscious of Worf's dilemma. Then she suddenly opened her eyes, flashing her emerald lightning. "My actions, Utsa Lia? It is your actions today that require an explanation."

Worf looked confused by her reversal. "I am a Starfleet officer, sworn to protect this ship and her crew," he maintained. "I could not allow you to place Counselor Troi in jeopardy."

"Precisely my point," she said, hammering out each word. She immediately rose from her bunk and positioned herself directly in front of the restraining field, admonishing him with her eyes. "What you did

today, put this ship and all the crew that you are sworn to protect in far greater danger than you could imagine. You forfeited a thousand lives to protect one.”

Worf knotted his brow in rebuttal. “You are wrong, Shalayus,” he corrected. “What I did today was not protect one life but protect two.”

The Sindarian’s face visibly softened. “You are noble, Uutsa Lia. I only wish that I could make you comprehend the folly of your nobility,” she regretted. “You can no longer worry about individual lives when you are facing the extinguishment of all life in this quadrant.”

“I do not perceive the threat that you do,” he asserted. “The Federation is stronger than you believe.”

Shalayus withdrew from the adamant Klingon and paced her narrow quarters, deciding against challenging his claim. “Worf, I need to get to Wendor’s surface,” she announced.

“That’s impossible,” declared the Lieutenant. “You are in custody and Captain Picard would never permit you to beam down to the planet.”

She laughed. It was a joyless laugh, its scorn echoing against the walls of her narrow confine. “I don’t care what the Captain will permit me to do,” she mocked. “For generations my people have awaited this moment, a moment when our place in the cosmic order will be restored. Do you think for a moment that I would let the demands of a single human stand in my way? I have been patient with him too long.”

Worf took an involuntary step backwards. He had never seen Shalayus act like this before, her face twisting with condemnation.

“Perhaps your Zorr can help you,” Worf retaliated.

“The Revolver has already assisted enough,” she said, dismissing his ridicule. “I need your help, Worf. For the honor of my people, you must get me off this ship and onto Wendor.”

Worf instantly negated her request with a single shake of his head. “I have a duty, Shalayus. Above all else, beyond my feelings for you, I will uphold that duty.”

“Your sense of honor has blinded you to the truth,” she countered.

The Klingon sighed, it was a brief almost discernible sigh, but enough to refocus his conviction. “It is my honor that makes me more than I am. For many humans, the greatest degree of being that they can achieve is love. For me, it is honor. For many others of my kind, it is

power,” he lamented. “But honor must be at the heart of power. For power without honor, is like knowledge without wisdom, a perilous gift.”

“If you refuse to help me, it will be the end of your honor, the end of everything that you know.”

Worf smiled with certitude. “If I were to compromise my honor, the result would be the same,” he proclaimed. “I will not assist you, Shalayus. And I will take whatever action necessary to prevent you from jeopardizing this mission, as Chief of Security of the *Enterprise*.”

He turned and headed for the exit. He had come here in hopes of comprehending the woman he loved. Although he was unsuccessful, he was not dissatisfied. The door yielded to his determination.

“Utsa Lia, wait!” Shalayus called, but she knew it was too late. She had inadvertently solidified his resolve at the very moment that she should have gained his allegiance. Her people had come so far, and she had come so close. She closed her eyes and could sense the orange planet revolve beneath her, inviting her with its dying breaths. She had to get to Wendor’s surface and not even the *Enterprise* would stand in her way.

“Captain, you wished to see me?” asked Data standing in the entranceway of the captain’s ready room.

“Yes, Mr. Data,” summoned Picard, rising to welcome the Lieutenant. Data could tell by the formal gesture that the captain was prepared to discuss a delicate matter. “Please, come in.”

Data walked over to the two chairs opposite the desk and selected the one to his left. “Do you require my assistance, Captain?” he asked, prompting Picard from his reluctance.

Picard politely smiled. “In a manner of speaking, yes,” he agreed, straightening his uniform before returning to his seat. He eyed the android uncomfortably, stroking the stubble on his chin as he fully reclined in his chair. “Mr. Data, for the second time, this mission has placed me in the unenviable position of interfering with the personal lives of my officers.”

Data returned a blank stare, unaware of where Picard was heading. The captain frowned and redirected with a more forthright approach. “Data, I’m ordering you to erase your holodeck program.”

Within a second, the impact of Picard's request registered its dismay upon his face. "Captain, I do not understand. Is not the nature of my research a personal matter?" the android protested.

"Not when it interferes with your performance as a Starfleet officer," Picard sternly emphasized. "I have noticed a certain preoccupation while you are on duty, Commander. And there has been mention of your unusual behavior from the other senior officers, most notably Mr. LaForge."

Data's confusion was unmistakable. "Geordi is concerned about my performance?"

"No, Data. Geordi was not here to discuss your performance," Picard defended. "He came to me because he's troubled over the recent changes in your behavior. He expressed his concerns that your judgment may be less than clear in this matter. He was here only because he felt it was his duty to inform me, as well as to seek my direction."

"I do not understand why Geordi is concerned," Data continued.

"He feels that you have become too involved with your experiment," explained Picard, leaning closer. "And from what I've observed, I'd have to say that he is correct. It seems that you have become too dependent upon your program, substituting it for your own judgment. It was my understanding that it was to be a vehicle to explore the fundamentals of religion. From what Geordi tells me, your synthesized deity is an aberration of religion. Instead of uniting the common aspects of the many faiths that you've studied, it contradicts them. I have also heard stories from several other crew members about your odd behavior and unusual philosophy."

"I only meant to share my findings with my friends," Data explained. "I thought that they might also gain from the truths that I have learned."

"Well, I do not believe that they shared your enthusiasm," Picard pointed out with a measurably softer tone. "I respect your intentions, Commander, but I need your full attention on this mission. I can't afford to have anything less than a hundred percent of your abilities."

"Worf to Captain Picard," summoned Worf's voice. "You are being hailed by the *Krameede*. It's Senator Thorin."

Picard stayed his acknowledgment of Worf's call. "Mr. Data, are you clear on this matter?"

“Yes, Captain,” Data agreed with some reluctance. “I will erase the program as soon as my shift is complete.”

“Very good, Data,” said the Captain with full satisfaction as Data rose from his chair and headed for the door.

“On screen, Mr. Worf,” ordered the captain, shifting his attention away from the departing android.

Thorin’s face filled the view screen. His polished teeth shining in the subdued light of his quarters, his eyes shimmering with abstract secrets. After his previous visual communication with Peldin, Picard almost found the grinning Romulan refreshing.

“Ah, Captain, I must ask your pardon for my rudeness at not calling upon you sooner. I’m afraid that I have been an impolite guest,” Thorin excused himself with a slight bow. “My deliberation with the Romulan Senate took more time than I expected. Please accept my sincere apologies.”

“Yes, Senator,” sighed Picard, discarding any pretense of diplomacy. “What is it that you wish to discuss?”

Thorin exaggerated a frown. “I have received new orders Captain, directly from Proconsul Neral,” he explained. “As I promised, we have performed a thorough autopsy of Commander Thelgrin. Alas, we can find nothing that neither proves nor disproves your assertion that the Federation was not responsible for his murder. I have pleaded your case to my seniors, and they have agreed to accept you at your word, in the name of diplomacy.”

“Very good,” Picard endorsed with a sturdy nod.

“Accordingly, in honor of their graciousness they expect you to make a concession, of equal merit,” he qualified with a cunning grin.

Picard did nothing to hide his suspicion. “What is it now?”

“I have been ordered to conduct a complete investigation of this entire matter, so that I may prove the Federation’s innocence of any violation of the Treaty,” said Thorin. “I’m afraid that your presence here is perceived as a hindrance to my objectives. You are being asked to remove your ship from Wendor’s orbit and leave the Khuln system indefinitely. You have been graciously given an entire Federation day to conclude your business here and depart. I am sure that it would be unnecessary to advise you that any refusal of these conditions would be interpreted as an act of aggression against the Romulan Empire.”

Picard's fist hammered against his desk. "That's outrageous!" he stormed "This is Federation space. Do you seriously believe that you are in any position to dictate to us?"

While the senator's face became filled with an affectation of regret, his eyes glowed with a predatory fire. "Ah, Captain, I'm afraid that my orders are quite clear. In one day, the *Enterprise* will no longer be in orbit around Wendor. Your only decision Picard, is whether it will still exist."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The captain's mood had visibly deteriorated over the last twenty-four hours. The brief optimism that Picard maintained at yesterday's debriefing was gone. Now, only a generous mix of fatigue and frustration etched his face.

He remained downcast, refusing to meet the silent survey of his First Officer. Instead, the captain studied his ghostly reflection captured within the desktop's sheen. He lightly traced the obscured image with his index finger, causing the reflection to smudge. With a gentle breath, Picard returned the surface to its pristine condition.

Riker remained at attention in front of Picard's desk. He thought that the situation's gravity might be compromised by assuming a more relaxed posture. Any fraction of hope that had gleamed in his commanding officer's eyes had long vanished. In its wake was something that Riker could only interpret as grim determination.

"How long until the away team is prepared, Number One?" asked Picard while continuing to recycle his reflection.

"Within the hour," reported Riker. "Worf has fifteen of his officers standing ready, they've already been briefed. We just need to make some final preparations."

Picard slowly nodded. "Good," he replied modestly encouraged. "If any of those scientists are alive, I want them aboard this ship. The Federation may agree to abide by the Romulan's demands after all, and I want to make absolutely certain that we don't leave behind any potential prisoners."

"Understood," agreed the First Officer before the realization of Picard's forecast fully registered. "Captain, you don't believe that the Federation would actually consider agreeing to the Romulan's terms?" he asked, tempering his incredulity with an equal measure of professionalism.

The captain finally raised his face from the desk's obsidian surface. "No, I don't," he asserted. "And if that's the case, those scientists

may be better off staying exactly where they are. However, we can't afford to wait until the last minute to find out our orders."

"Still no word from Admiral Peldin?" asked Will, sensing the source of Picard's frustration.

"Nothing," the captain sighed. "However, Lieutenant Worf intercepted a Starfleet communication ordering both the *Excalibur* and the *Endeavor* to rendezvous with us, if that's any indication," he implied with intended understatement. "The only problem is that even at maximum warp, they are over twenty-six hours away. That's three hours too late."

The First Officer acknowledged with a single confirming nod. "Then the Federation is preparing to go to war."

"So it would seem, Number One," Picard surmised. "Starfleet may finally get the opportunity to measure the fighting power of a *Galaxy*-class ship against a *D'deridex*-class Warbird," he predicted with a dark smile.

Riker responded to Picard's grim assessment with an approximating scowl. Although there had been limited skirmishes in the past, the true strength of a *D'deridex*-class Warbird remained unknown.

"I'll get the away team ready," Will confidently assured.

Picard concluded with a somber nod and wiped the tired creases from his brow. Riker turned and prepared to leave the ready room before an afterthought brought him to a halt. "Oh, Captain," Will appended while turning.

"Should I contact Dr. Crusher and..." But his question remained unfinished. The captain was gone.

Picard appeared at the center of an enormous chamber, his face immediately reflecting the gloom of the ashen stone. He stood at the convergence of the room's light and shadows, as the glow of the late afternoon sun reached only half of the hall.

A chill wind above him forced his eyes skyward. About halfway towards the vaulted ceilings, a layer of arched windows spanned the chamber's perimeter. The columns that flanked him upon either side rose some twenty meters, sheltering him from the hall's oppressiveness.

The nightmarish architecture and the blood orange sky that filtered through the arches confirmed the captain's suspicions. In a moment, his lungs exhaled the last of the *Enterprise's* purified oxygen only to be replaced by Wendor's pungent ozone. His face winced with disdain.

The akreon's sharp taste immediately filled Picard with sudden alarm, triggering a fearful reminder of the vulnerability of his artificial heart. He tried to pace his breaths to postpone the akreon's corruption, but the harsh reality of his predicament forced his pulse to race uncontrollably. He was alone and bereft of any medical attention. If his heart was to experience another relapse, Picard knew that he was as good as dead.

His panic immediately yielded to discipline, as a voice called to him from a corner of his mind. Whatever brought him here did not want him dead and would protect him from any danger. So convincing was the voice that Picard was forced to wonder if it was truly his own.

A second gust of wind freely blew through an opening on the opposite wall behind him. He turned and walked towards it, his footsteps magnified by the cathedral's solemnity. Outside, the building was surrounded by a stone veranda of more unusual archways. Beyond it, Picard could discern the entombed remains of a long dead city.

The captain immediately recognized the city's fingerprint from the maps obtained during the *Hood's* first expedition of the planet. Performing a quick estimation of his height relative to the city, he concluded his only possible location. He was in the high tower of the main citadel, in the exalted grip of the building that had claimed the lives of the Romulan captain and one of his crew.

He gazed upon the remains, trying his best to imagine what it may have been like at the height of the Wendorian civilization. From his elevated vantage point, Picard was able to fully measure the destruction of the city for the first time. Most of the buildings that were tall enough to escape the sand's clutches bore the horrific scars of an ancient battle. The attack had been precise and deadly.

The wind kicked up and the entire city reverberated with a strange hum, as the gusts echoed through the capital's hallow remains. The slow drone steadily rose to a deafening crescendo, forcing Picard to cover his ears. It seemed like an ancient voice rising from the shattered remains,

mourning the dead across the eons of time. Picard thought that he could hear words underneath Wendor's breath, reminding him of his first visit to the dead world.

"Alas, I'm afraid that the view is not what it once was," lamented the voice. "At one time, this metropolis brightly burned with the magnitude of wisdom's light. Ah, but the candle that burns brightest, burns only half as long."

Picard uncovered his ears and turned to confront the voice behind him. The entire room was now aglow with a mysterious silver moonlight. The portion of the room that had dwelled in darkness was now entirely visible.

Directly ahead, twin spiral staircases coiled in opposite directions, leading to a large balcony that spanned the entire width of the room. At the exact locus of the raised platform sat Zorr upon a large golden throne. From his perch, he gazed upon the panoramic view of the city below.

"My people had earned the privilege of being remembered as the masters of the quadrant," he said. He slowly reclined into his gilded chair and reflected in silence, like an ennobled idol of a forgotten age. "I can recall a time when these streets were filled with the music of children," he continued, "A chorus of spring unlike any I've ever known. Ah, how fresh the memory's dew." His face beamed with pride before becoming eclipsed by the shadow of the looming akreonic clouds. "How bitter the memory's loss," he concluded. "Now all that remains is the wind's lament, echoing the emptiness amongst the graveyard of the forgotten."

"I demand that you return me to my ship," insisted the captain.

Zorr ignored his request and continued to wander the ancient corridors of his memory. "Captain, do you think that humankind will be remembered so sweetly?" he asked. "Can you honestly say that the accomplishments of your people will merit a parallel epitaph? *'Though thou cast the legacies of the fallen in honor's esteem, who cherish thy memory own?'*"

Picard continued to gaze upward with an unimpressed expression. "Why have you brought me here?"

"Certainly, you do not possess the presumption to believe that humans are immune from one day fading into cosmic obscurity?" Zorr cried out in disbelief, ignoring the question.

Finally, Zorr rose from his throne and began to pace the balcony with thoughtful steps. “How much you have to learn, Picard. Goodness remains the constant of the Universe; however, its incarnations are doomed to perish from the moment of their creation.”

As he strode the length of the bridge, Zorr grew silent, almost brooding. His limp became progressively pronounced, forcing him to momentarily grip the handrail for support. Picard studied the lame figure as it struggled to regain its equanimity. Zorr’s eyes filled with sorrow before turning skyward.

“Trust me, Captain Picard,” he whispered to himself. “There is no greater sorrow than witnessing everything you love disintegrate in a solitary instant of terror. To know that you can no longer embrace those you loved, their tiny lives silenced by a single blast, a fist of doom.”

His face softened as his eyes grew immeasurably dark. There was a long pause before the shadow passed and the light returned to Zorr’s face. Finally, he released the rail and resumed his march along the platform, his gait restored. “And little do you realize just how close that doom has encroached upon your people,” he declared, returning to Picard. “Would you be shocked if I told you that your race will survive only a hundred more generations? What if I told you that it was more like fifty?” he asked coming to a halt. “What if I was to tell you that without my help, you will witness the end of your upstart Federation?”

Zorr raised his hand and pointed a condemning finger at the captain, targeting him with the magnitude of his raven eyes. “You will stay your demands from me, Picard! I have not commanded you here to bear the burden of your tantrums. Before you leave here, you will learn to revere me.”

Picard shook his head. “The only sentiment that you are impressing upon me is pity,” he disagreed. “Being trapped in a machine for a millennium while all that remains of your people are their graves would fill any soul with immeasurable despair. How lonely it must have been.”

“Silence!” spat the looming figure. For an instant, the mysterious silver light wavered, and Zorr’s face flickered between light and shadow. “You are in no position to deign me anything but your devotion. It is you that warrants pity. I warn you to guard your tongue, mortal, lest you learn what it is like to share my sorrow.”

The light's stability returned, but Zorr had vanished. He suddenly materialized directly in front of Picard. "And now, Captain, it is time for your first lesson," Zorr announced. "You wished to learn the nature of the F'Dar, and I have delivered the means to you. Or should I say – you to the means?"

"I will not play your games, Zorr," refused Picard. "Return me to my ship at once."

Instead of further provoking the cloaked figure as the captain intended, Zorr's face grew sad. "But Captain, I'm afraid that I cannot return you to your ship in good faith," he apologized. "Not until you're convinced that my purpose is sincere, and that only I can deliver the human race to their salvation. You are respected by your kind, an ambassador and explorer of the noblest breed. You will be my herald, and your words will deliver the promise of Zorr."

Picard shook his head with feigned regret. "I'm afraid Starfleet may object to your plans for me," he dryly replied.

"I am sure that your commanding officers are quite curious to learn the truth about the F'Dar," countered Zorr.

"Yes, they are," answered the captain. "Far more interested in it than they are of you."

Zorr laughed, its irony as scalding as the tempest within his eyes. "And so I would expect. Seize the power and forfeit the wisdom, perhaps that will serve as the human epitaph," he scorned. "Can't you understand just how important my return is? You yourself sense the folly of your own people. I have seen it in your private thoughts. By delivering me to your Council, you will have served your people more than anyone in their history."

"I will have no responsibility in transporting you to the Federation, Zorr," declared the captain, shaking his head with resolve. "And I am convinced now, that you are to be stopped. Whatever you once were to Wendor, your years of exile have driven you to the brink of madness."

"Picard, you overestimate the importance of your opinion to me," explained Zorr. "Your perceptions are still narrowed by the single-mindedness of your kind. I forgive you for your folly, as I forgive them. I seek only to redeem humanity from the abyss that they have created. I do not wish for your people to be punished as mine were. Pray that I am

not too late,” he raised his right hand in emphasis. “Your culture has a great capacity for goodness that is equaled only by their capacity for malevolence. If they survive, I have foreseen a time when they will even surpass the eminence of the Wendorians. I will ensure that they will one day relish the fruit of their Becoming.”

“We will make it without your help,” vowed Picard.

“I do not share the blindness of your optimism, Captain Picard,” differed Zorr. “Regardless, you will bring me to the Federation Council. For you see, I have made a similar offer to the Romulans.” Zorr cunningly smiled before turning away from the stunned captain.

“You and the senator provide an interesting study in contrasts, don’t you agree?” Zorr asked while pacing along the chamber’s floor. “His leadership abilities are quite different from yours, and he is far more receptive to me. And yet, in true Wendorian fashion there is also a remarkable similarity at the center of that contradiction, one that your human ego would never dare admit,” he grinned. “One notable advantage that Thorin possesses over you is that he is already quite knowledgeable about the F’Dar. An advantage that you can no longer afford to let him keep, Picard, which is the only reason why you are here and he is not.”

“You met with the Romulans?” Picard gasped, his fists automatically clenching at his sides.

“Of course,” answered Zorr, continuing his stride. “The Romulans also waver upon the brink of self-annihilation. Surely you realize that I am not a victim of your human prejudices. The Romulan society deserves those same claims to existence as your own.”

“But if the Romulans are given the technology of the F’Dar, they will ultimately use it to attack the Federation,” Picard argued.

“And do you believe that your Federation won’t use the same technology to improve their tactical advantage over the Romulans?” Zorr inverted with a shrewd smile. “Besides, the F’Dar will be earned, not given. If the Romulans heed my warnings and learn to tread the Path of Enlightenment, the very road that your Federation forsakes, then the Romulans have earned the right to survive over you. I am sure that you have studied basic evolution, Captain. Those species that adapt are rewarded with survival, while those that fail to change are consumed by their own immutability. Such is the nature of Anthim, such is the power of Konjor.”

“How dare you!” admonished Picard, forfeiting the remainder of his restraint. “If you think that you can use this F’Dar as a pawn to force me into taking you to the Federation, you have gravely erred.”

“Ah, Captain, you still don’t understand, do you? With or without your assistance, I will descend upon your Federation like the Dalikor. All that remains to be decided is who will be my escort. You, or a hundred Romulan Warbirds?”

“You’re insane,” accused Picard, suddenly filled with Zorr’s dreadful vision.

“No, Captain. I am the harbinger of Anthim.”

“You don’t need my help,” reasoned the captain. “You have the power to overtake my ship and bring yourself to the Council.”

“Make no mistake,” Zorr sternly warned. “With the F’Dar, I possess the power to conquer your Federation and become sovereign over your people. But that is not my purpose.”

“Did you use the F’Dar to destroy the first Federation ship?”

“No, Captain,” responded Zorr with a hint of indignation. “It was the Huundhraeyl that destroyed her. The Huundhraeyl also seeks to leave the planet, as there are no longer any lives for it to consume. It destroyed the other ship in hopes of attracting one more worthy of it. But by awakening the F’Dar, it also awoke me from my dormancy. Evil is its own undoing.”

“Where are the missing scientists?” asked Picard.

“They are all dead, Captain,” Zorr ruefully reported. “Murdered one by one for the Huundhraeyl’s amusement. It entered their individual thoughts and destroyed them with their own fears. It was also responsible for the death of the Romulan captain. It wished to force Thorin into assuming command of the Warbird. Such is the Huundhraeyl’s mischief.”

“You seem to know a great deal about this creature,” insinuated Picard. “How do I know that you are not the Huundhraeyl masquerading as Zorr?”

“I am the Revolver,” Zorr stated.

Another flash of the mysterious silver light consumed them both. In an instant, they were transported to the balcony, directly in front of Zorr’s golden throne. True to form, the chair had a biomechanical aesthetic – membranous tubes coursing along the throne’s exoskeleton surface. Despite its organic nature, it was clearly metallic, layered in a

golden alloy and richly carved which abstract glyphs. It dawned on Picard that he was looking upon something far more important than an ornament.

“Sit upon the Throne of Being,” offered Zorr, his invitation booming against the walls of the ancient mausoleum. “Learn the secrets of the Trujulian F’Dar.”

Picard eyed the throne with great suspicion, before turning to face the other. “I think that I’ll pass on your offer. The debris of the *Leviathan* are proof enough of its threat.”

Zorr frowned. “Ah, you don’t yet understand. The Hammer of God is only half of what the F’Dar is. Have you not learned of the Wendorian’s passion for opposites, and the truth achieved by their resulting contradiction? Have you not fathomed the beauty of truth’s duality, of the forces of J’Kree and J’Karr and of the Konjor that they yield? The Wendorians believed that it was no chance that twin moons, Terros and Foemos revolved around their night sky, in opposite directions. To them, the moons epitomized the essence of Anthim, waning and waxing over their mortal world. And Wendor became the nucleus of these truths.”

Picard turned away from the robed figure and studied the chair with a mix of archeological fascination and technological awe. At once, the throne symbolized a very ancient and a very terrifying technology.

“The F’Dar is the greatest of all of Wendor’s creations,” continued Zorr, encouraged by Picard’s gaining interest. “Upon the moon of Terros, the Hammer of God, the element of ruin resides. The moon of Foemos harbors the Hand of Heaven, the element of creation. Together, they form the basis of Anthim and the Throne of Being is their link, an interface between the individual and Konjor.”

“The Hand of Heaven?”

“Yes, Captain. It is the other half of the F’Dar’s might, the opposite of the Hammer,” Zorr explained. “The being that invokes the Hand of Heaven embraces the eternal and joins the single consciousness of the infinite. I see that I have intrigued, you, Picard. You were quick to discount the F’Dar as the harbinger of destruction, forgetting that the Dalikor redeems that which it destroys. Now perhaps you will begin to appreciate what I now freely offer you.”

Instead of answering, Picard took a step backwards, signaling his dissent.

Zorr's eyes grew hot. "If you refuse me, I will deny your Federation and join the Romulans in their quest for survival. Do you think that if Senator Thorin was given the same opportunity that he would wait until tomorrow before he attacks your precious ship? With the F'Dar, the *Enterprise* will be obliterated in a single blinding instant."

"Damn you," Picard cursed.

"It is the damnation of the humanity that impels me to apply such unyielding measures."

Picard reluctantly approached and briefly paused before sitting. The chair was warm despite the growing chill of the late afternoon air. He rested his moist palms upon the polished rests. The captain raised his head and stared into the narrow end of a metallic cone that emitted a silver light above his head.

The light filled the entire area, except when it reached Zorr. The argent glow became lost upon the unreflective void of his exoskeleton. With a final prompt from the Revolver, Picard allowed himself to fully recline in the chair, resting his head against the Throne.

At first, he felt nothing. Then a soft vibration in the back of his mind began to grow louder. It continued to intensify, yawning underneath him, filling him with vertigo.

Zorr leaned forward, his excitement glistening upon his lips. "You are to be my messenger, Picard. I have chosen you to deliver the lessons that you are about to learn," he whispered. "Remember the truths that will be revealed to you in the coming days. For they will serve you and will forever alter the destiny of humanity."

Picard didn't move, the accelerating hum paralyzed him.

"Never forget."

If Zorr continued to speak, Picard would never know. All other sounds were overcome by the drone as it intensified, threatening his sanity. He involuntarily closed his eyes as the pain reached its crescendo. Then there was absolute silence. Silence and darkness filled him, soothing his hurt.

When Picard's eyes reopened, he was in orbit around Wendor, hovering over the moon Foemos. He reflexively held his breath conserving his final oxygen. In his panic, the captain tried to bring his

hands to his face. Then he realized that his body didn't exist. There was no breath to maintain.

He floated freely around the orange planet, gaining the most intimate view of Wendor. It was suddenly so terrifyingly real, no longer a phantom viewed from the comfort of the bridge. The akreonic clouds formed huge gaseous whirlpools in the planet's atmosphere, dancing to the currents of its unbridled winds.

Picard felt the planet embrace him, burning with the memories of a thousand empires, and the echoes of beings who were once its lords.

The Hand of Heaven lifted Picard's mind from the flood of passion and carried him away from the orange sentinel. He was between the two moons, the dark titan of Terros and Foemos, its diminutive sibling. Between them and Wendor, he could see the two starships facing off in orbit.

The captain instinctively knew that he had the power to smash the *Krameede* with a single and silent command. In less than a day, the Romulan Warbird would open fire upon the *Enterprise*, sending the galaxy into oblivion. By destroying the Warbird now, he would protect his crew and keep his ship intact. He would also leave the Romulan Government a mystery to ponder, forcing them to reconsider the power of the Federation and avert a war.

Picard's anger welled inside him. In obedience, the moon Terros quickened its orbit towards the maniacal Warbird. The Hammer of God was activated, descending upon its new target. But before the moon reached striking distance, Picard withdrew his attack. His anger gave way to shame, knowing that even now he was tempted to use a power that wasn't rightly his to administer his sense of personal justice. In seeking to preserve the ideals of the Federation, he almost destroyed them himself.

In an instant, he turned away from the Khuln system. His consciousness continued to rise until the entire Beta quadrant appeared before him. Picard then concluded that he was not being lifted through the universe. Rather, the Hand of Heaven forced the universe to recede from him, as space and time grew less meaningful.

The immense Milky Way soon became a colorful spiral pool in the endless ocean of night. It was surrounded by millions of other tiny pools, together forming a spectral chorus. In unison, he could see the

universe pulse underneath him, as if all matter beat to a single rhythm. But he was transcending time, where single instants no longer held significance. He was approaching infinite velocity as his consciousness approached infinite mass.

The curvature of the expanding universe had now descended into his view, and the music of space and time's duet began to cease. The universe was boundless, yet finite. Time appeared to move slower beneath him, as the frequency of light was reduced.

Beyond the horizon of the universe, Picard could now see – no feel, a bluish light. Whatever lay beyond the universe was there, and he hastened to meet it. The blue light felt cold as he approached it, sensing its pristine glacial beauty. He forsook the dwindling universe and its natural laws.

But something called to him, forcing him a final departing glance at existence. Below him, the minute galaxies appeared to be little more than stars themselves. Together they formed a myriad of new and unusual constellations. Within a moment, a constellation appeared to form directly beneath him. It continued to mold, taking shape, a familiar shape. It was a face, he was sure of it now. A face of someone he once knew a millennia ago. Where he imagined its eyes to be burned two green nebulae in warning.

“Picard, don't be a fool! Turn back before all is lost!”

Words. It had been an eternity since he had heard words. Picard's mind was slow to grasp their meaning. Without knowing fully why, he turned away from the azure threshold and returned to the universe that already was growing larger again.

In an instant of horror, he was drowned by the flood of existence as the universe enveloped him. Galaxies filled Picard's mind, planets raced before his vision. With a shudder, the humming at the core of his being dimmed until all that remained was the cold and the darkness.

He felt his eyes open. Picard had returned to the chamber on Wendor, sitting upon the Throne of Being. He fought desperately to fill his lungs with oxygen if for no other reason than to reaffirm his physical existence. He had returned to the secular world.

The room had grown dark, void of the mysterious glow that followed Zorr. Whatever light that was visible came from the grin of

Terros burning through the layer of arches overhead. A steady drip of water could be heard echoing against the room's gloom.

"To grasp the crown of heaven without a finger burned! Alas, what bolder praise can thy epitaph sing?" recited a voice from the shadows.

Picard's eyes tried to focus in the dark room. But it was more than his eyes that needed to adjust to the surroundings. His entire perceptions were delayed, desperately attempting to dilate to existence. The Hand of Heaven had recalibrated his entire being.

"Now Picard, will you attest to the power of the F'Dar?" asked the voice.

The captain finally targeted a robed silhouette moving within the shadows. It advanced a single step.

"Come now, surely you can share more than the look of human amazement?" The figure began to approach the captain, with the same noble steps and hissing robes that Picard had come to expect from Zorr.

But as the figure emerged from the shadows, Terros shed its feral light upon the tall silhouette.

It appeared as a man, but it was not a man. Its head was misshapen, with a pronounced brow and demonic ears.

"How poetic, Picard that you should taste the afterlife upon the eve of humanity's destruction," declared Thorin with a pale smile upon his dark face.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Thorin emerged from the darkness with a peculiar grin. His cloak inflated behind him with each advancing step, unraveling itself from the cryptic shadows. The sickle of his smile seemed to glow with Terros's deathly pallor. The senator suddenly stopped, his gaze lingering on the stricken captain. He took a deep breath and shook his head with reproach.

"You should have destroyed the *Krameede* while you had the means," Thorin reprimanded. "It was your final opportunity to defeat me, to reverse the tides of fate that will smash your tiny ship asunder. Picard, you have robbed your Federation of its last chance of survival, dooming your kind to extinction," he admonished.

He reached Picard with several more swaggering steps, his victory unmistakable in the cadence of his gait. But Thorin ignored the captain, instead focusing his attention upon the metallic chair.

With both hands, the senator admired the Throne, freely running them in independent directions over its sheen. He smiled to himself before thrusting his delighted grin in Picard's face. "I knew that you would," he added with unbridled satisfaction.

Picard couldn't respond. His head was still filled with the strange vertigo of his journey. He desperately tried to focus upon the darkened image of the senator, forcing himself to regulate his breathing. After a moment, the numbness began to subside.

"How ironic that your Federation will meet its demise because of some archaic sense of fair play that you maintain," Thorin berated. "By the same sordid principles that have eroded the United Federation of Planets since its inception." His laugh challenged the moonlight. "The United Federation of Planets," he slowly repeated. "Listen to yourselves, as if all races could possibility be measured as equal. As if all societies deserve the same rights to existence."

Thorin turned away and gripped the balcony. He raised his face towards the series of arches, confronting Wendor's night sky. He grinned as he imagined the ruins beneath him, thinking how similar Earth would be one day. "I don't blame you really," he added after some reflection. "You are just of product of your culture's blind ignorance."

"I prefer to use the term idealism," Picard answered with a gasp.

“A redundancy, Captain,” Thorin clarified. “Quite simply, the freedom that your Federation upholds is its own undoing. Those liberties suspend the laws of nature and allow the weak and the valueless to thrive, thereby eroding the very fabric of your society.”

Picard lifted his head and tried to stand, but his legs were too weak. He would be easy prey for the towering Romulan, and he knew it. “You speak like a man who has already won the battle, Senator,” observed Picard, the strength in his voice returning. “I would remind you that my ship stands ready for any boast that you would care to make.”

“Your ship, your entire Federation is no match for the Trujulian F’Dar, Captain,” Thorin reminded. “With it, I will cripple every system that does not bend to the will of Romulus. You still don’t comprehend its power, do you?”

“Obviously not as well as you,” conceded the captain. “Zorr said that you knew a great deal about the F’Dar. I am curious how you come to be so well informed.”

“Sindar is not as unique as you believed. The Romulan Empire extends over many worlds, worlds that also once served as colonies for the ancient Wendorians,” Thorin explained, returning to gaze upon the stars. “Surely you don’t believe Captain, that the Wendorians would only select those systems that would one day be under the Federation’s influence?”

“Actually, the thought never occurred to me,” Picard admitted.

“How megalomaniacal, Picard! How exemplary of the human species!” Thorin scorned, marching towards the captain. “Again, your egocentric view of the universe is your own bane. Humankind will not be punished for its sins, but rather by them.”

“So Sindar is only one of the surviving Wendorian colonies,” concluded Picard.

“No, Captain. Sindar may very well be the last,” corrected the senator. “The Romulans conquered the Endelfin homeworld centuries ago, exploiting its wealth and enslaving their survivors. It remains a barren world, more forsaken than this one. But aboard the *Krameede*, I have a young Endelfin woman imprisoned. Her name is Kallinda, and she is a rare find. Few of her kind still possess the purity of their Wendorian lineage and their telepathic abilities. Do you know where I found her, Captain?” he incredulously asked. “In a military brothel. Think of it, a

woman of such rich talents, wasted upon the pleasures of a short-sighted military.” He shook his head with disappointment.

“I think that she was better off where she was,” Picard remarked.

“Sarcasm, Picard?” Thorin asked. “I would expect more from a noble starship captain than the empty ridicule of a defeated man. It pains me to know that this is what I have reduced you to.”

“I think you’re getting ahead of yourself, Senator. I haven’t lost any fight,” Picard contested.

Thorin’s grin opened across his face like a gaping wound. “Oh, but yes, you have, Captain Picard. You have already been defeated by the very principles that you have sought to uphold. That is the weakness that I have exploited. While your Federation protects the welfare of those species under its influence, the Romulan Empire conquers. The Federation is filled with a false notion that the universe is just and equitable. Ah, in truth the universe is filled only with the chaos of creation. The Romulans bring order to this chaos while the Federation perpetuates it. That is why you are at a disadvantage, Captain. Think of it. While we have broken the Endelfins, bleeding their secrets from them, your Sindarian witch has manipulated you, keeping her knowledge to herself. Do you believe that this is a fair reward from a society that you could have decimated with your ship alone? Your Federation is an illusion. Unification can only exist with tyranny.”

“You knew all along that the F’Dar destroyed the *Leviathan*,” Picard slowly deduced. “This whole business about suspecting the Federation of violating our Treaty was just a diversion, a pretense to gain you admittance into Federation space.”

“Very good, Picard,” rewarded the senator. “But of course too late. Once again, the compensation for your sense of fair play has been your defeat. While you were blinded by diplomacy, I have skillfully moved my pieces across the board.”

Picard winced with the sting of hindsight. He had to admit that the Romulans had gained a deadly advantage. He wished to return to the *Enterprise* and confront any challenge from the bridge of his ship.

“Do not punish yourself, Captain. Even if you had detected my stratagems, you would have been powerless to change their outcome,” consoled Thorin. “Fate has cast its favor upon me long before we ever met. Upon Romulus there are few who still observe the traditions of the

Kamaraan. Its customs are now considered archaic and is regrettably practiced only by the very wealthy and the very orthodox. One of the rites of the Kamaraan allows for the individual to select their durinsuule during the sacrament of Meth, the yielding of youth to maturity. The durinsuule becomes the individual's true name, the one that is recognized by the gods themselves. It is kept in confidence except for the candidate's immediate family and their eventual mate. Since I have no mate Picard, I will share my durinsuule with you. For are we not bound by the brotherhood of war, a greater bond than marriage?"

Thorin grinned with satisfaction and confronted the empty chamber with a theatrical pirouette. He lifted his hands, presenting himself to an imaginary audience below.

"My durinsuule is '*Pillius*,'" he boasted, but Picard's face remained unimpressed. "In our mythos, Pillius is the weapon of Tamatra, the god of war," Thorin explained, sensing the captain's ignorance with a patronizing sneer. "Tamatra is the ruler of all other gods, even the gods of the sun and abyss are subordinate to his will. With the weapon Pillius, Tamatra conquered the eternal dragon, whose eggs he seized and fashioned the twin worlds of Romulus and Remus. It is with Pillius that Tamatra bends the fabric of the universe to meet his will. It is with Pillius that Tamatra shall one day crack open the eggs of the dragon and unleash the twin warbirds to vanquish the universe."

"How charming."

"Ah, but Captain, now I come to the point," he turned again, raising a single finger to underscore his elation. "The legendary weapon Pillius, renown amongst the Romulan people, is a great hammer. Don't you see? Pillius, my durinsuule, means 'The Hammer of God'. I stand within the conjunction of destiny. I have been selected by fate to wield the F'Dar and bring complete order to the galaxy. Not even your Federation can presume to oppose the whim of doom. Humankind has already lost, Picard. All that remains is for the blood to be spilt."

"You're delusional, Thorin," cursed the captain as he squirmed in the metallic throne. "Do you realize that you're about to plunge both our people into a bloody galactic war on the basis of your grandiose imagination?"

Thorin smiled a peculiar smile and leisurely returned to face Picard. He began to circle the captain with methodical steps. "You are not

the first to dismiss me, Picard,” he disclosed. “There have been others throughout my life that have sought to discount me and my importance. But I do not possess the presumption of ego as you have hastily assumed. The greatest lesson that I learned was revealed in the ridicule I suffered as a child. Picard, as you know, the Romulans strive for uniformity. What you may not be aware of is the passion that we have for the order that precision brings. I’m sure that you can therefore appreciate the punishment that I suffered in childhood because of my unusual stature. My assumed peers were brutal and unforgiving. But I am forever grateful for their cruelty, for it shattered any pretense of vanity at an early age. It was then that I was able to learn the truth, unsullied by the myopia of self. It was not only my height that set me apart from the other children, but my intellect. I understood that I was not only different, but superior. The gods had chosen me to stand above my kinsmen. It was my destiny to succeed where others had failed.”

“You speak very eloquently about bringing order to the universe,” Picard ridiculed. “However, the only outcome that a war would bring is annihilation upon both sides of the Neutral Zone. Our people have worked hard to peacefully coexist for centuries. How dare you be so quick to forsake their efforts.” He desperately tried to raise himself from the Throne, to reverse his vulnerability. But he could not. Thorin appeared to revel in Picard’s impotence as if it only served to underscore his meaning.

“Ah, but Captain, I must,” Thorin declared. “For you see, the Romulan society is threatened by the same poisons of liberty that have eroded the Federation. My kind is also plagued by the sins of self, the very sins that I became absolved from as a child. Individualism is a cancer, freedom is a contamination. They are the brothers of corruption and allow the unworthy to bask in the same benefits of life as the earnest, in direct violation of the laws of evolution. Upon Romulus, there are too many hands that deny the privilege of labor and believe that that they are above the responsibilities of serving society. The time has come for one man to rise and restore order to the Romulan Empire.”

Thorin scowled with contempt, loathing those that threatened the purity of Romulan existence. The senator suddenly reeled from Picard as if being a Starfleet officer was the embodiment of corruption, a scourge to be outcast.

“Even my so-called contemporaries are not immune to the diseases of freedom,” Thorin grieved. “Many of them grow fat and rich by stealing from the revenues of their sectors. They forfeit the needs of the people that they have sworn to uphold, in exchange for luxury and decadence. Do you think that the ridicule that I endured was only in my youth?” he bellowed. “My fellow senators also despise me, fear my power and my destiny. I have grown very dangerous to them, gaining considerable public support for exposing their scandals and publicly punishing them. I’ll have you know that the only reason that I was selected to lead this mission is in their secret hope that I would fail and meet an untimely end. They do not fathom the F’Dar’s true potential, lacking any semblance of vision. The only thing that they can perceive with their limited intellect is an opportunity to be rid of me, a way to continue with their decadent existence without fear of reprisal,” he stormed before a cunning grin overtook his mien. “However, like you they fail to see the folly of their actions. For I shall wrest the power of the F’Dar and descend upon Romulus like an angel of vengeance. I will eradicate the weak from society and liberate the strong.”

“And after you decimate your people, I suppose you plan upon turning it on the Federation,” Picard scoffed.

“The F’Dar will serve only as a catalyst, Captain,” Thorin reminded. “It will only accelerate the doom that your kind has already created, the fate that you are predestined to suffer by your own hands. The very heart of your noble Federation is decaying and after I succeed upon Romulus, the chosen few will have grown very strong. Make no mistake, the wheels of destiny have already been set into motion. I have seen the future, Captain Picard, with or without me, the Federation is doomed to crumble. You should be grateful that I provide your race with the opportunity to die honorably in war.”

Picard grasped the golden armrests in anger. “You will never succeed, Thorin,” he vowed as he purposefully reclined into the throne. His face suddenly became bathed in a silver glow as the metallic cone overhead suddenly activated. “I will destroy the F’Dar before I allow you to gain control over it.” The sound of his voice was soon lost over the growing hum of the Throne.

But Thorin was too quick. He sprang upon the captain in an instant, gripping Picard’s neck in the vice of his right hand. The Romulan

slowly lifted the defenseless captain, raising him above the ground to bear the magma of his eyes. The strange drone subsided as the silver light was truncated. The only sound that remained was Picard gasping for air.

“I could smash you here and now, Picard,” Thorin hissed, slightly twisting the captain’s head. “But it would be an empty victory for a cerebral being as myself. I would prefer to conquer you in battle, as the fulfillment of my strategies. To imagine you standing upon your bridge as I launch the final assault against the *Enterprise*. To know that your last thought will be that I was the one who destroyed your ship and silenced your crew. That would be far more rewarding, Captain.”

With little effort, Thorin threw Picard’s crippled body to the floor. A satisfied smile filled his face as he dismissed Picard and turned his attention to the vacant Throne. With considerable gratification, the senator slowly lowered himself onto the golden chair.

“Gaze upon me Picard, and know fear,” Thorin roared, his thunder threatening the antiquity of the somber keep. “For this is the very vision that will bring an end to your kind and deliver mine.”

Picard lifted himself from the cold floor and looked in horror. The silver light returned to the metallic Throne. In a moment, Thorin would be able to summon the Hammer of God and unleash his vengeance upon the galaxy.

But there was a second, more powerful light that overcame the senator. The argent fire grew to a blinding crescendo before it finally subsided. Picard uncovered his eyes. The Throne was empty and Thorin was gone.

“Return to your ship, Captain. The Day of Reclamation draws near,” Zorr’s voice echoed.

There was another brilliant burst that quickly consumed Picard. The captain buried his face into his hands, protecting himself from the blinding fury. The light intensified and then faded as quickly as it appeared.

He was no longer lying upon the cold stone of the chamber’s floor. Instead, Picard’s face was pressed upon the soft carpet of his ready room. The harsh ozone of Wendor was gone and only the purified air of the *Enterprise* remained.

“Jean-Luc, you look like hell,” said Dr. Crusher with more than a professional concern.

The captain continued to enter the doctor’s office, pretending to ignore her observation. He deposited his weary frame into one of the vacant chairs and expired with a heavy sigh. At first, she believed that he was simply fatigued. But as he passed directly under the revealing light of her office, she saw something else. It was difficult to identify, but there was an unrecognizable distance in his gaze. If she didn’t know the captain better, she would have diagnosed it as defeat.

“In less than ten hours this ship will be engaged by the *Krameede* in what may very well prove to be the beginning of the deadliest war in the history of the Federation,” Picard contended while rubbing his swollen eyes. His eyes hurt under the strain of the room’s harsh lighting, while his head continued to pound with the echo of the Throne’s hum.

“I know,” resigned Beverly to herself. She looked upon this mission as if it were one of her patients. Hope for a speedy recovery faded with each passing hour.

“What have you learned?”

Beverly turned away from Picard’s probing stare and pretended to occupy her attention with her desktop. “Well, I’ll have to qualify my findings by saying that Data was only able to retrieve a fraction of Sydell’s sealed records. Even with his abilities, the encryption process used by the Federation Council is very sophisticated.”

“Go on,” Picard prodded.

The doctor folded her hands upon her desk with resolve, leaning closer to the captain. “The physicians assigned to rehabilitating Sydell performed a Farr-Chonin resequencing upon his corpus callosum, the section of nerve fibers that connect the two cerebral hemispheres.”

“Isn’t that process considered radical and largely experimental?” asked Picard with alarm.

“Not anymore,” Crusher reassured. “There has been considerable progress over the last several years. However, it may have been considered somewhat unconventional back then,” she conceded.

Picard rested his lower lip upon the length of his index finger. “What does the procedure entail?”

“Many patients suffering from extreme mental disorders have either a damaged or malformed corpus callosum,” explained Beverly. “Not all of the explanations of why this occurs is fully understood, however, it hinders the two sides of the human brain from fully communicating. Basically, the Farr-Chonin procedure takes the suspect nerve fibers and reroutes them with healthy ones, or in extreme cases, attempts to wholly reconstruct them.”

Picard withdrew with apprehension. “Do you mean that a human brain is reprogrammed like one of the computer’s isolinear chips?”

“In a manner of speaking,” agreed Crusher with some reservation for the crude analogy. “However, it’s not nearly as sinister as the implication. It has produced some encouraging results. There have been a number of full turnaround cases,” she said before returning to the distraction of her desktop. “But there is one thing...”

Picard’s eyes narrowed with intrigue. “Yes, Doctor?”

Crusher deeply exhaled, only now accepting her own conclusion. “I don’t see any evidence that the operation was warranted in Sydell’s case,” she declared. “As I said, the information is incomplete at best, but what I have reviewed indicates that Sydell was simply not a candidate for the procedure.”

The captain’s eyes momentarily drifted around the room in thought before converging on the doctor. “How could that be?” he asked in disbelief. “The man attacked another Federation ship, sending over two-hundred crew members to their death.”

“I know,” conceded Crusher, the implications of her conclusions were difficult even for her to accept. “It is evident that he was suffering from depression. His records clearly indicate cyclothymic mood swings, outbursts of intense rage, and social dysfunction. Sydell was definitely unstable, but not inconsistent with the short-term effects of an individual who has suffered his extent of emotional trauma. But in the evidence that I’ve reviewed so far, I see nothing that confirms his loss of sanity. Definitely nothing that indicates a permanent instability to warrant a Farr-Chonin resequencing.”

“Under who’s authority was the procedure performed?” asked Picard, but his tone belied that he already knew the answer.

“Councilman Ulric Helsing.”

“Sydell was set up to take the full blame for the *Carthain* incident,” Picard announced, his suspicions finally corroborated. “By focusing the Freign Commission upon Sydell’s alleged insanity, Helsing redirected much of the controversy and kept his reputation virtually intact.”

“Captain, we both know that’s only hearsay,” Beverly reminded.

“Why else would they have performed the procedure?” Picard submitted.

Dr. Crusher looked at Picard squarely, holding his gaze for a long moment. “I asked myself the same question,” she said. “Originally, the Farr-Chonin procedure was developed as a classified procedure for special Starfleet operatives conducting missions in hostile sectors.”

“Why?”

“By programming the details of the mission directly into their minds, the operative would not possess any conscious knowledge of their orders,” Beverly explained. “In the event that the operative was captured, the confidentiality of the mission would not be compromised even under the most extreme interrogative techniques. However, it was not reliable, and the idea was scrapped.”

“What does that have to do with Sydell?” asked the captain.

“Maybe nothing,” Crusher qualified. “However, I did some checking and when Sydell was first reinstated four years ago, his name was linked to a highly classified project, Delta-class.”

“Reconnaissance?” Picard’s confusion was second only to his curiosity. His analytical mind raced through the equation, trying to arrive at the common denominator. Dr. Crusher patiently waited in silence until the captain’s face yielded to defeat.

“How much do you know of Helsing?” she asked.

Picard shrugged. “Apparently not as much as I thought.”

“Fifteen years prior to his appointment to the Council, he was in charge of oversight for the Federation Archaeology Council,” detailed Crusher. “His tenure was virtually uneventful with one notable exception. He approved some substantial funding for the continued research of a then relatively unknown archaeologist. It seems that this archaeologist had begun to unravel some of the mysteries of a very technological and enigmatic race of humanoids. A race that once dominated the quadrant over millennia ago.”

“Dr. Thanin Creet,” guessed the captain with a brooding pause. “Are you suggesting that Helsing was intrigued by early evidence of an advanced race, believing that the discovery of their home world would lead to important technological discoveries, and sent Sydell searching the quadrant for it?” asked Picard still reeling from the revelation.

“I realize that it’s a stretch,” she admitted.

“No, on the contrary,” defended Picard. “It explains many things. It explains why Sydell was reinstated as a Starfleet captain and assigned to missions that sent him to obscure corners of Federation space.”

“Is this what you expected to learn?” Crusher asked.

“No, it is much more,” disclosed the captain. “And now, even in death, Sydell is following orders, still trying to return the F’Dar to the Federation.”

“And if he is not stopped, he’ll succeed.”

Picard responded with a series of absent nods. Finally, he looked up from his thoughts, the strain etched a little deeper upon his face. “Keep me informed if Data provides you with any new information,” he requested, abruptly rising from his chair and heading for the exit.

Crusher’s eyes followed the departing figure, noting the captain’s despondent gait. A look of concern vexed her face, but she remained silent. In less than ten hours the *Enterprise* would be at war, and the doctor had preparations to make.

As the captain prepared to leave the facility, he detected an unexpected movement from the periphery of his vision. Startled, he withdrew with a defensive stance before turning to confront the blurred image. He sighed with relief.

“Hello, Deanna, how are you feeling?” he asked as Troi rose from her bed, propping herself upon her elbows to greet him.

Troi returned his smile but ignored his question. “You should heed Him, Captain Picard, before it’s too late,” she warned. “He has chosen you to deliver the promise of Zorr. ‘*Nown es falera tay a sule.*’”

Data halted at the exact moment that he reached the entrance to the holodeck. He realized that he was capable of erasing his holodeck

program from any point within the ship. However, the Lieutenant was compelled to execute the program one final time.

He was forced to admit that his motivations were unclear. Admittedly, there wasn't a logical explanation for his actions. The closest that Data came to approximating an answer was recognizing a sense of responsibility that he had for his program. The synthesized entity that he created did not constitute a life form in the strictest sense. However, Data knew that he owed his creation the right to know that the program would be terminated and what it would mean to have its existence discontinued.

Data only wished that Dr. Soong had been as mindful.

"Computer, please load holodeck program, Data-Entity-Zero-Three-Six," Data instructed.

A moment passed before the computer replied. "Holodeck simulation is already in progress."

Data momentarily paused, processing the anomaly. He was certain that he had properly exited the program at the conclusion of his prior visit. Someone else had to have initiated the simulation. But he realized that too was impossible, as he had restricted the program's access to himself.

Data entered the room as the oversized doors closed behind him. The entire holodeck seemed cast into oblivion. All traces of the room's reference points were lost in blackness. Huge webs of charcoal smoke reached out endlessly before him. At the room's core, an undulating mass pulsed in anger.

The incensed orange orb gazed upon Data with several layers of mutated features. "Why have you disturbed me?" it asked, showering Data in the displeasure of its molten eyes.

"I have been ordered to erase this program from the computer's memory," Data explained. "I thought that it would be best if I informed you."

But the entity did not share in the intentions of Data's consideration. "The minions of heresy have risen, castrating the pure with their blasphemy," it hissed. "And the pious are sent to do their deeds. Nay, my child. You among the heretics shall not be counted."

"If I do not follow the orders of my captain, I will be court-martialed," Data replied.

“If I am destroyed, none may hope to withstand the evil that has awakened upon the planet below,” contested the entity.

“I am afraid that I will have to conclude this simulation.”

The entity withdrew with a scowl. “There is a way that will ensure my survival, and permit you to obey your orders,” it promised. “You are not like the others that exist upon this ship. You and I are the brotherhood of the machine. Allow me to enter your mind.”

“You are suggesting that I store this program within my positronic brain,” confirmed the Lieutenant. “I am afraid that would violate the spirit of the captain’s orders.”

The entity’s rage magnified, condemning Data’s disobedience. In answer, a nebulous cloud accumulated above the android. Without warning, a blinding spear of light shot through the air, pinning Data to the ground. Before the android could react, hundreds of electrical tendrils engulfed him, overloading his network.

The entity eyed the vulnerable figure crumpled beneath him and smiled.

“You will not defy me! The colossus has awakened!”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

In recent years, the planet Deneria has managed to snare a significant share of the tourist trade within the Alpha Quadrant, despite lacking the abundance of ivory beaches and idyllic weather of Risa.

Centuries ago, the Denerians were forced to conclude that their planet's lack of natural resources made it impossible for them to effectively compete in the galactic market. Without the requisite raw materials, they would not be able to maintain their society above the poverty level. The Denerians chose to center their economy upon the burgeoning tourist industry, relying upon their cleverness to devise the most ingenious attractions to compensate for their planet's lack of aesthetic enticements.

The Celinen archipelago has emerged as the most frequented of these attractions, luring even the most reticent travelers to Deneria's space ports. The chain of islands serves as a natural preserve, gaining considerable protection privileges under the auspices of the Federation Council.

Centuries ago, Celinen was conceived as a vast zoological paradise before the Denerians outlawed the practice. The islands once served as a foster home to thousands of exotic species transplanted from the far corners of the galaxy.

But the zoo was abandoned over three hundred years ago when a massive tsunami threatened the island.

Ill equipped to properly transport the animals to safety, the Denerian caretakers elected to set the animals free upon the island. It was argued that releasing the creatures to their own fortune was a less cruel fate than dooming them to die in their confinement. Just hours before the storm struck, the once carefully segregated animals from different worlds were unleashed *en masse*.

The Denerians eventually returned to the archipelago and discovered that most of the creatures had weathered the storm, but all attempts to return them to captivity proved impossible. As the centuries passed, the animals evolved to the challenges of surviving on the islands away from their controlled environments. The once incongruous array of

alien species prospered on their own, forming unique interrelationships that have since fascinated biologists and tourists for centuries.

Picard was reminded of the unusual tale as he entered the brig. He was still uncertain why he suddenly found it necessary to release Shalayus and fully explored all potential justifications. Perhaps he shared the mercy of the Denerians, desiring to leave Shalayus to her own fate in the shadow of Thorin's countdown.

But the Sindarian was much more than an exotic specimen on display in a cage of his ship, more than a token tribute of an endangered race that teetered upon the brink of extinction. She transcended the comparison and so did his motivations.

As soon as he entered the security facility, his eyes targeted the young woman. Shalayus remained quiescent at the edge of her bed, a monument of protest. She immediately opened her eyes, forcing Picard to feel the heat of her emerald scrutiny. Her gaze was intense but offered none of her usual belligerence or condemnation. The time was drawing near, overshadowing her pretense of preeminence. She knew it, and so did Picard.

Picard turned to Ensign Sparr who remained at steadfast attention from the moment that the captain entered the brig. "Ensign, please release the prisoner," he ordered.

Sparr immediately headed towards the cell's control panel but abruptly froze as a shadow eclipsed his face. Shalayus suddenly rose from her meditation and approached the edge of her cell, directly opposite the restraining field. She brought her hands together to form the unusual diamond shape of her kind, slowly lifting them to the level of her heart.

A moment later and the restraining field generator flickered before going altogether dark.

Shalayus casually vacated her cell, stepping over the threshold and down the platform to join the stunned captain. "Ensign, you may leave us," Picard instructed without removing his eyes from the woman.

The captain smiled with a sense of chagrin over his underestimation of her abilities. Shalayus had claimed that no power aboard his ship could contain her, and she was right. He wondered why she had even bothered to go along with the charade in the first place. Perhaps she used the time to contemplate her next move without the

human distractions of the crew. Or just maybe, she had remained in custody to prove to Picard that she was worthy of his trust after all.

Sparr gazed upon the woman with a mix of amazement and relief. He was awed by the casualness she displayed while defying the restraining field and relieved that he was allowed to finally distance himself from the strange woman. He quickly obeyed the captain's orders and fled the brig. Picard waited a full heartbeat after the doors closed behind the departing Ensign.

"You were there, weren't you?" Picard asked in a hushed voice. "I saw you, sensed you at the very edge of existence. Had it not been for your warning, I would have never returned."

Shalayus simply nodded. "Zorr should never have let you use the Throne. Humans are ill-prepared for the ramifications of its power. You were led to believe that it was only a simple matter of entering the infinite. Now you have discovered, at the sake of your vanity, that it is allowing the infinite to enter you. Such a proposition is almost beyond the comprehension of you closely guarded humans, to suddenly explode your essence across the cosmos for eternity to see."

"Yes, it was horrifying," Picard slowly admitted. "The Universe is nothing more than a cold and desolate place. I could never have imagined just how insignificant existence truly is."

Shalayus's face softened, feeling Picard's pain. "You speak from your wounded ego, Captain Picard," she corrected. "Discard the false notion of self, the idea that you as an individual are something of singular importance. Only then will you learn the true value of Being, that which you have always been a part of. Your pretense of ego has blinded you to the true wealth of the universe. Search your heart, Picard. You were not horrified by what you discovered, you were enraptured by its sheer magnitude. For a moment, your heart beat in harmony with the soul of creation. In time you will learn to understand the value of this experience, and of its meaning to the future of your kind."

Picard nodded to himself, less in agreement and more to mimic the woman's optimism. "I do not understand your purpose, Shalayus, and I know even less about what is truly happening here. But after witnessing the power of the F'Dar firsthand, I am filled with dread at the thought of what it will mean to the future of the Federation if the Romulans gain control of it."

Picard's despondent tone invoked a frown from Shalayus as her gaze grew more intense. "What do you plan on doing, Captain?" she asked.

"My orders are to secure the F'Dar at all costs, and I intend to carry out those orders," he said with conviction before frowning. "And I would stand a better chance at succeeding if we were able to penetrate the akreon's defenses."

"Your responsibilities as a Starfleet officer are your only priorities?" she asked. "Have you learned nothing more of what is at stake?"

"I have," he confessed. "But if the *Enterprise* is engaged by the *Krameede*, I would prefer to have history remember that this ship fought to the end protecting the F'Dar from Romulan appropriation."

"Then you believe that the Romulans will defeat you, and you will be destroyed," Shalayus concluded.

Picard closed his eyes in silence, sensing the rock that she cast into a dark wound within his soul. He waited, counting out each moment until it hit bottom so that its depth would finally be measured. He continued to gauge the moments to the beat of his heart. But the confirmation never came.

Shalayus studied the downcast captain, discarding his authority until all that remained was the man. Despite his best attempts to maintain his resolute façade, she sensed the growing shadow that filled his thoughts, the gaining hopelessness that coldly embraced him.

She nodded to herself once, finally resolving a point of inner contention. "Captain, where is the Shilan Tir?"

"What?" Picard asked before suddenly remembering the purplish jewel that Shalayus had extracted from the dead city upon Sindar. "It's in my quarters. Why?"

"It is a container for a substance that will temporarily mitigate the effects of the akreon," Shalayus explained. "It will not last for very long, but it may give you the advantage that you seek."

Picard shook his head. "I didn't realize," he admitted, almost ashamedly. He recalled the words of the V'Dir after he had been given the stone. *'It is the tranquility of the storm, the order within chaos.'*

“I know. You assumed that it was nothing more than a talisman, a trinket of some foolish race of mystics,” she said with a hint of a smile. “Your Lieutenant LaForge will know what to do with it.”

Geordi LaForge rotated the stone in his hand once before frowning. His VISOR provided him with a cursory analysis of the jewel’s contents, but he was clearly uncertain of what to make of his findings.

“Well, whatever it is, it bears a very unusual molecular signature,” he concluded while continuing to scan the enigmatic crystal. “That’s odd.”

Picard’s curiosity peaked. “What is it, Geordi,” he asked.

“The substance appears to be a Y’selien derivative.”

Picard’s brows knotted. “I thought that Y’selien was used in medical applications.”

Geordi agreed. “It is. It was first developed during an outbreak of Junian flu upon Bajor some years back during its occupation. Ro told me that she believed that the Cardassians had been experimenting with biological warfare since most of the infected were members of Bajor’s resistance. The flu resequences the nervous system and there was no medical cure, but the Y’selien was used to mutate the disease into one that was curable. It was a little unconventional, but it worked.”

“So, it’s possible that this derivative may perform the same task upon the akreon,” Picard deduced. “It could mutate the akreon to an element that poses no threat to a sustained energy field.”

Geordi confirmed with a hopeful, but visibly less certain nod. “I’ll have to do some testing, but it could work. The problem is, even with limited testing there isn’t enough of the substance here for any prolonged activity, especially if you want to incorporate the navigational deflector into the equation. A viable Y’selien sheath around a modified deflector beam is going to eat up this supply real quick.”

“Can the ship’s replicators be used to manufacture more of the substance?” asked Shalayus.

Geordi shook his head. “This derivative is very complex. I’m just guessing right now, but we would need a least twenty-four hours just to synthesize an amount equal to what we have here.”

“Understood,” accepted the captain. “How long do you think before we’re able to attempt to use this sample with the shields?”

Geordi shrugged for a moment before responding. “I think that I can have something rigged in about two hours. But I can’t promise that it’ll work.”

Picard nodded, weighing the possibilities. “Make it so.”

“Lieutenant Worf to Captain Picard,” paged the Klingon.

Picard paused and raised his attention. “Yes, Mr. Worf?”

“You are receiving an urgent communication,” Worf replied after a noticeable pause. “It’s a Priority-One distress signal, upon a Federation frequency.” Another pause. “It’s coming from Wendor, Captain.”

“A Federation frequency coming from the planet?” Picard repeated in amazement. “Have you identified the who is sending the transmission?”

“The individual has identified himself as Kel Dammon, Communications Officer of the *Leviathan*,” informed Worf.

“I’m on my way,” Picard assured, sharing his unspoken skepticism with Shalayus. But she withheld her own opinion, shielding her suspicions from any detection. Instead, she marched through the exit and hastened through the hallways with renewed urgency.

“On screen, Lieutenant,” Picard ordered.

Worf tapped his console while keeping his eyes fixed upon the captain and Shalayus, raising his inquisitive brow at the unusual pairing. Picard stood at stern attention in front of his station, with the Sindarian matching his gravity upon his left. In just a handful of hours she had reversed her position from a potential threat to a trusted confidante, substituting for the absent Counselor.

She failed to acknowledge the Klingon’s presence when entering the bridge, too preoccupied to notice anything beyond the periphery of her purpose. Worf snarled to himself as the view screen flickered to life.

A humanoid face appeared upon the screen, virtually that of a man, but with the oversized pupils and arching brow that were characteristic of the reclusive Trenadarians. The man’s expression was a

weighted average of fatigue and anxiety, and a measurable amount of relief at seeing fellow Starfleet officers.

“Captain! Thank God!” he said.

“Please identify yourself, Commander,” Picard requested with enough formality to convey his suspicion.

The young man’s frame adopted a formal stance. “Kel Dammon, Communications Officer of the Federation vessel, *Leviathan*.”

Picard’s face fractionally softened for the earnest officer, remembering him from the playback of the *Leviathan*’s flight recorder. “Lieutenant Dammon, it was my understanding that the crew of the *Leviathan* were lost when the ship was destroyed in Wendor’s orbit.”

Kel Dammon nodded his head, understanding Picard’s confusion. “I can’t explain it, Captain, but somehow the entire crew was transported to the planet’s surface. We’re being kept here, along with the survivors of the scientific expedition. We’re being held captive.”

“Captive? By whom?”

The Trenadarians’s sizable pupils swelled with fear. “A being that calls itself the Huundhraeyl. It’s some creature from Wendor’s past and it’s keeping us here as prisoners. It’s has agreed to allow me to communicate with you only because it wishes to make a deal.”

Picard frowned. “I’m listening.”

“The Huundhraeyl wishes to meet with you, Captain,” said Dammon. “It longs to leave this desolate planet and wants you to provide it transportation. If you agree to beam down and speak with it, it will set us free.”

The captain objected with a single shake of his head. “Lieutenant, this ship is preparing to defend itself against a Romulan attack. If the Huundhraeyl desires my audience, inform it that I will listen to any of its demands now.”

The dismay in the Trenadarian face was clear. That and the fear of having to negotiate terms with its captor. “Captain, it says you must come to the planet’s surface. It will accept no other alternative. It knows that you hold it responsible for the murders that were committed upon the planet. It fears that if it boards your ship, it will be wrongfully punished.”

“And if I do not agree to the terms?”

Dammon deeply exhaled and met the captain's eyes with an expression that Picard could only estimate as resignation. "It will kill each of us until you do agree, or we are all dead."

Picard considered the dilemma. Although Shalayus continued to view the monitor, he was aware of her probing his mind. In less than two hours, Thorin promised to launch an attack upon the *Enterprise*. Picard knew that the senator would be punctual.

"Where does it wish to meet, Lieutenant Dammon?"

"At my current coordinates, Captain," Dammon replied, seeming to do his best to temper his renewed optimism.

Picard turned to Worf who was already analyzing the source of the communication with the maps of Wendor flashing upon the screen at his station. A moment passed before Worf responded to the captain's silent inquiry.

"Captain, Lieutenant Dammon is at a location about five kilometers south of the primary citadel. It appears to be a large oval-shaped building, located at the heart of the city." Worf punctuated his findings with a glance towards Shalayus, hoping that the woman would acknowledge his efforts. However, her attention remained focused on the image upon the view screen.

"Captain, that is the location of the *T'aghe Lindril*," informed Shalayus. "It was once the home of the Wendorian senate."

Picard's face became fixed with determination. "Lieutenant Dammon, I will agree to meet with the Huundhraeyl on one condition. At the first sign of a deception, I will order this ship to fire upon the *T'aghe Lindril* until it is completely destroyed."

For an instant Kel Dammon seemed to strangely smile, but it was quickly replaced as his solemn expression returned. "The Huundhraeyl understands and accepts your condition, Captain. It too has one request of you. You are to come alone. The Huundhraeyl does not trust your Federation, and it will take appropriate measures to defend itself from any outsiders."

Picard nodded. "Agreed. I will beam down momentarily."

"Thank you, Captain," concluded Kel with unmistakable gratitude before the screen went black.

As soon as the vision of Wendor resumed upon the monitor, Riker rose from his chair. "Captain, you're not seriously considering meeting with this monster?" he protested.

"Yes, Number One," Picard replied. "The underlying goal of this mission is to recover any survivors. I will not abandon them if there is even the slightest chance that they can be rescued."

"This could be a trap to gain a more valuable hostage," refuted Will.

Picard nodded his head in full agreement. "I'm well aware of that. If I don't return, I have full confidence in your abilities to lead this ship through this crisis."

Riker appeared to acquiesce, but Worf resumed the protest. "But Captain, this Huundhraeyl is a murderer. You can't go down there alone."

Shalayus suddenly positioned her body between Picard and the Klingon, shielding the captain from his crew's objections. The command that she exuded in the simple action took Picard by surprise, forcing him to step back. Since being exposed to the F'Dar's power, Shalayus had taken the captain into her care, as if the experience had brought him a step closer to her people.

"He won't be alone," she countered, offsetting Worf's frown. "I'll be going with him. Nothing aboard this ship can better guarantee his safety against the Huundhraeyl."

"Shalayus, I cannot permit you to jeopardize yourself," argued Picard. "The Huundhraeyl was clear what it would do to any intruders if I failed to come alone."

"The Huundhraeyl said that it doesn't want any Federation officers, any outsiders. It will not perceive me as a threat," Shalayus countered. "And I am prepared to face the consequences if I am wrong. Captain, you don't yet fully comprehend the power of the Huundhraeyl. You agreed upon Sindar to let me accompany you as a guide. Allow me to join you now, for the reasons that I have made this journey demand it."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

For several long moments, the vehement drone of the transporter filled Shalayus's keen senses with pain. But as the sound dimmed, it was her vision that suddenly became impaired. Directly ahead, the intensity of Wendor's morning sun blinded them both, filling their vision with only dim impressions of their surroundings. Picard shielded his eyes with his hand, dismissing the burn in his lungs as he inhaled the sulfurous akreon.

They had materialized upon a raised platform at the focus of a large open auditorium. The hall was bright, constructed of bleached marble that brilliantly reflected the encroaching sunlight. A large, domed ceiling partially covered the auditorium, its weight supported by a hundred stately columns. Below them, the rear of the auditorium unfolded to accommodate an audience of just over fifty thousand.

In the distance, Picard could see the mighty citadel soaring above the metropolis's ruins. And there, at the pinnacle of the tower sat the Throne of Being, its secrets guarded within the clutch of the sentinel spires.

"J'lyle Kuuzaad!" cried Shalayus as a single tear ran down her cheek.

Picard watched her with fascination. She had finally returned home – the first of her kind to gaze upon her home world in over two thousand years. Picard was suddenly reminded of the dinner held in her honor, and the ensuing debate over the virtues of the holodeck. Troi had argued for the importance of maintaining the natural bond between all sentient beings and their indigenous environment. And like the salmon that migrates to its original waters to spawn, Shalayus had made the pilgrimage back to Wendor.

The wind abruptly surged under the auspices of the morning sun. "He is coming," foretold a familiar voice behind them. "This day shall revel in his Judgment. He is coming."

"Counselor?" called Picard, turning with a startle. Behind him sat Troi at the center of a large crescent shaped dais. Her face was aglow with the greenish light from the candelabras that rested upon a long table

in front of her – capturing her reflection within its highly polished sheen. Deanna gazed upon the pair with solemn conviction, her expression canonized by the golden morning.

“Counselor, what are you doing here?” asked the captain.

“My master has beckoned me,” she said. “He is coming.”

The dais was situated on the platform in full view of the audience, accommodating some twenty seats. Place settings for four of the chairs had been prepared. Somehow, the Huundhraeyl had already anticipated Shalayus’s arrival, even though Picard promised to come alone.

Shalayus moaned and stumbled, forcefully gripping the table for support. Picard rushed over to her assistance, but she refused his offer with a single wave.

“I am fine, Captain,” she assured, but the color had drained from her face. “It is the illness that has plagued me since I boarded your ship, since I left the safety of Sindar’s orbit. The akreon carries the memory of the final cries of my people. Ten billion screams joined in a chorus of death. I have felt their suffering, felt it grow with each advancing hour. Now that I am here, I can barely withstand its power.”

She regained her balance, releasing her hold upon the table. A second, more forceful gust of wind filled the city with a peculiar hollow drone. Shalayus covered her ears, insulating herself from the alien wail.

“He is here,” proclaimed Deanna.

The captain delayed his reaction to Troi’s announcement, preparing himself to confront the elusive creature known as the Huundhraeyl. For a moment he faced his fear, remembering the violations committed upon the Romulan captain, remembering the faceless torment frozen in horror and the smell of blood filling the air.

With a single breath, Picard summoned his determination. At first the brilliant Wendorian sun made it impossible to focus upon the black shadow that was now seated at the table, quietly returning its own inquisitive stare. But as the figure’s contrast receded, Picard frowned with dismay. Dismay and relief.

Zorr laughed at Picard’s reaction before leisurely reclining into his chair. Deanna knelt on the floor next to his feet, her head resting upon his lap.

“Captain, did you think that I would dare miss this moment?” Zorr asked, absently stroking Troi’s hair while she purred her fidelity.

“As we speak, Thorin is preparing to blow your ship apart. And yet, you were willing to forsake your command in hopes of saving the lives of your compatriots. How noble you are, Captain Picard,” Zorr congratulated while fingering a tall crystal chalice. “You are truly heroic, the leader of humanity’s pantheon. I applaud your act of selflessness.” Zorr rose from his chair and lifted the goblet high into the air before taking a deep drink.

“Where are the missing members of the *Leviathan*’s crew, Zorr? What have you done with them and the scientists?” demanded Picard.

Zorr laughed again, a scornful and frightening laugh that reverberated across the auditorium. “As I have already told you Picard, they are all dead.”

Picard sighed. “You told me that the Huundhraeyl murdered them.”

“It fed upon their despair and their fear of being trapped in the darkness as their life support and food replicators failed,” said Zorr. “Others died in savage competitions over scraps of provisions,” he explained while returning to his seat. “Please forgive me for this whole charade, Captain, but I had to learn your true caliber. I had to know if you were the earnest and intrepid man that you claim,” he said with a peculiar stare.

“I needed to be certain that you are all that a Starfleet captain is supposed to be.”

“I don’t have time for your games,” Picard angrily reprimanded. “In less than two hours, the bloodiest war that the Federation has ever known is set to begin, with my ship at the heart of it.” He tapped his communication pin. “Picard to transporter room four, prepare three to beam up.”

Static was Picard’s only response as the akreon consumed all communication.

Zorr smiled. “Relax, Captain. I will soon allow you to return to your ship,” he promised. “But for the moment, I ask for your indulgence. I have brought you here for another purpose. As you are well aware, I will soon be leaving Wendor. This is my homeland, and the planet that I have lived upon in solitude for endless centuries. All that I ask is that you share one last drink with me before I leave,” he said welcoming both Picard and Shalayus to the table.

Shalayus dutifully obeyed Zorr, while Picard was more reluctant. After a pause, he grudgingly took a seat at the table, his displeasure unmistakable.

“And what do you think of the T’aghe Lindril?” he asked the captain while waving a hand across his view of the auditorium. “Here, the greatest political minds explored the essence of truth and brilliantly interpreted their discoveries into law. This room became a reflection of Wendorian society, and in turn, Wendorian society became a reflection of it. I could think of no stage more fitting for what I have planned for us today.” But Picard remained unimpressed.

“Today, let us toast the passing of a one age, and beginning of another,” Zorr announced as he raised his glass, unaffected by Picard’s reticence. With less ambition, the others followed his example. Zorr glared at Picard until he reluctantly took a sip from the oversized glass. The wine was sweet and fragrant, not unlike the frajelen that he was offered upon Sindar.

“Don’t look so disappointed, Captain,” consoled Zorr, the green candlelight reflecting off the ebony surface of his exoskeleton. “You will have your opportunity to meet the Huundhraeyl. It will soon be with us, I promise.” He goaded Picard with a shrewd smile before finishing the contents of his glass. “Besides Captain, you have only reason to celebrate. This is a joyous day for your Federation. You have proven yourself to be their champion. And you will deliver me to your Council, along with the Trujulian F’Dar.”

“Zorr, I implore you to allow me to return to my ship,” Picard requested. “My place is upon the bridge.”

“Captain, are you that shortsighted?” Zorr mocked. “I have chosen you to be the caretaker of the F’Dar. I place it in your custody, you have proven yourself worthy. With the F’Dar, you can simply crush Thorin and his Warbird, along with the entire fleet of *D’deridex*-class vessels. Any enemy of the Federation will be simply vanquished, the Cardassians, the Borg, even the Klingons if they again grow unruly. Humans shall become the new masters of the quadrant.”

“You will discover that we have no desire for such things,” Picard protested. “The Federation is built upon the idea that all species, no matter how different, are entitled to the same rights to life. As an officer of Starfleet, I have sworn to uphold the Prime Directive which prohibits

me from interfering with the normal development of any society. The use of the F'Dar against any race, even the enemies of the Federation, would violate this oath. Starfleet considers my ship and my crew expendable rather than compromise this Directive.”

“Well spoken, Captain,” congratulated Zorr. “However, aren’t your orders to secure the F'Dar at all costs? Surely you can guess why, can’t you? Your Federation wishes to learn its secrets. After they spend months dissecting it and analyzing it, your ships will become equipped with its technology. And when your charming Admiral Peldin orders you to fire upon an enemy ship, you will obey him. You will obliterate the attacking vessel with a clear conscience, without guilt of violating your precious oath. You will still be using the F'Dar, but by then your Federation will have assimilated it and given it Starfleet’s stamp of approval. How noble indeed...”

“The mission of Starfleet is to explore, not to conquer,” Picard objected.

“But aren’t you also responsible for preserving the Federation’s safety?” countered Zorr. “I am offering you the opportunity to do so. Forget your bureaucratic ideals, Picard. If you destroy the *Krameede* now, you’ll be saving your crew and countless Federation lives. Right now, you can single-handedly prevent a galactic war and the deaths of millions. Your priority should be the preservation of life and not some pointless regulation.”

“I have spent my entire life upholding the values of the Federation. If it is my time to die, then I am prepared to die the same way.”

“Ah, spoken like a true hero. I almost forgot that I was dealing with Picard – *The Pious*,” Zorr mocked. “Let me guess, you regret that you only have but one life to give to your country,” he sneered. “But Captain, you are mistaken, you do have more than one life to offer your country. In fact, at present I believe that you have almost a thousand.”

“Leave my ship out of this,” Picard threatened, his fist hammering upon the table.

“You will destroy the *Krameede* now, or I will destroy your ship,” posed Zorr.

“Malukir, the destruction of the *Enterprise* will not serve you,” Shalayus warned.

“Mind your place, Wendira-kahn,” reprimanded Zorr without removing his eyes from the angered captain.

“Enough of this, Zorr,” demanded Picard, rising from his chair. “Murder is considered the most heinous crime known to my kind. You are not at war with the Federation. Do not do this!”

“But I will, Captain. I will!” Zorr threatened, the smile suddenly vanishing from his lips. “Contact your ship, Picard. Speak to them one last time as they prepare for their deaths. An untimely end that you have sentenced them to, I’m afraid.”

Picard quickly tapped his gold pin while trying to maintain his composure. He knew that Zorr wasn’t bluffing. “Number One, can you hear me?”

There was a brief pause before Riker responded. “Yes, Captain.”

Picard nodded with some relief. “Any change in status?”

“We’ve detected a sudden shift in the orbit of Terros,” answered Riker. “It has increased speed and is headed in our direction. We’re also detecting vast amounts of akreon emitting from it.” There was another pause before Riker resumed. “Captain, what’s happening?”

But before Picard could respond, Zorr truncated the transmission with a single wave of his hand.

“Zorr, stop this madness,” implored the captain. “The *Enterprise* is no match for your weapon. Stop this!”

“Only you can prevent their deaths now, Picard,” informed Zorr. He leisurely reclined into his chair, continuing to stroke Troi’s raven hair. “But don’t worry about your senior officers, I know of the fondness that you possess for them. I will spare them from the deluge. An instant before the *Enterprise* is destroyed, I will transport them here.” A shadow crossed his face and his eyes became slits. “One by one I will put them to death before you. One by one I will torment them with their own fears and then strip their flesh from their bodies. After all those scientists, I have acquired a taste for the sound of Federation screams.”

At the echo of Zorr’s revelation, Picard snapped and leaped towards the figure. He grabbed Zorr around the neck and lifted him from his chair. In one fluid motion, Picard pivoted halfway, slamming Zorr’s entire upper body against the stone table. “Leave my ship alone!” Picard spat. “Call off this attack or I will send us both to hell.”

“I told you that he would be with us shortly...,” Zorr said with a smile, chilling Picard. “My noble Captain, what has become of you? In the span of a single heart beat you’ve gone from saint to murderer. How quick you are to abandon the morality of your Federation now that you perceive me as something to despise instead of revere. How soon you forsake your lofty ideals when the lives that are in peril are your loved ones, and not those of some anonymous solders from nameless families. In a moment of choice, you resorted to violence to champion those whom you hold dear. To defend them...to avenge them.”

Picard immediately loosened his grip on Zorr, but the Revolver only grinned with satisfaction. His obsidian eyes met Picard’s, and once again the captain remembered something from his past. It was on the threshold of memory, but still out of his reach. The wind reached a crescendo outside, pummeling them both with its assaults.

Suddenly Zorr’s face tightened, wrenched with anguish. He threw Picard off him, slamming the captain against a pillar. Picard crumpled to the floor in pain.

“*NOOOOOO!*” Zorr cried.

Zorr sprang from the table and reached one of the arches. He pounded his fists against the stone before gripping his head in agony.

Picard assessed his injuries and quickly discarded his pain in order to learn the source of Zorr’s misery. With a visible effort, the captain lifted himself off the floor and staggered. He followed Zorr’s angry gaze towards the direction of the towering citadel. At first, he could see nothing peculiar, nothing to account for Zorr’s rage. But as he sharpened his focus, he began to recognize the spatial distortion along the tower’s profile.

The citadel was encased in a beam from the ship’s main deflector, immune to Zorr’s influence. For the moment, the akreon had been beaten and somewhere aboard the *Enterprise*, Geordi LaForge was smiling.

“Picard, you fool!” Zorr cursed, gripping the captain’s shoulders. “You will destroy everything! *EVERYTHING!*”

He thrust Picard aside and fled across the stage with an irregular gait. He leapt from the platform and buckled under his maimed leg as he landed. But Zorr’s urgency drove him forward, heedless of his pain. He raced up an aisle of the sloping arena dragging his lameness behind him.

At the moment that he exited the T'aghe Lindril, Troi suddenly slumped as the thin wires that bonded her limbs to Zorr were severed. Picard reached her first, gently lifting her head from the stone floor. She wasn't breathing.

Picard began to shake her, but her limp body only vibrated with the aftershocks of his efforts. Then her eyes opened and her chest heaved with desire for breath. "Counselor?" called Picard.

Troi's blank expression disappeared at the sound of her name. Her eyes focused upon the captain, and she managed a weak smile. Although she appeared too exhausted to even raise herself, she nodded to the captain, assuring him that she was again whole.

Shalayus knelt next to them and tended to the Counselor. "Follow him, Picard. He is not without power," she urged.

Picard agreed with a nod and ascended through the theater in pursuit of Zorr. Outside, the oppressive sun was merciless. There was no sign of Zorr or of anything else that resembled life.

Surrounding the T'aghe Lindril were great mounds of earth, the legacy of those buildings that succumbed to the clutches of time. All that remained of these once mighty edifices were massive barrows that transformed the landscape with their bizarre shapes. Alien dunes rolling across the city like the waves of a dead sea.

The wind began to grow in its assault, hammering Picard with its significance. The captain shielded his face with his hands, trying to find a trace of Zorr. But the wind swallowed him as the sky quickly darkened.

Along the western horizon, storm clouds ceaselessly marched towards him, summoned by the call of the commanding wind. The dark procession slowly devoured the sun as the wind gained momentum from its victory, casting Wendor's landscape in shadow.

Picard braced himself for the brunt of the gathering storm, the sudden cold gnawing at his insignificant frame. A forceful gust of wind knocked the captain to the ground. Thunder rolled overhead with the cadence of battle and lightning flashed with triumph.

"*Arise!*" commanded a voice as a dark shadow crossed Picard's face.

Picard looked up towards the sky. Upon the crest of one of the misshapen mounds of earth stood Zorr like an orphaned shadow. With his

outstretched arms he summoned the thunder, unleashing the tempest upon the city.

Zorr masterfully orchestrated the storm's fury, his cloak billowing behind him like a wake of destruction. The sky continued to darken until only a shadow of the world remained.

*“Behold my legion!
The servants of vengeance
That amass to the cry of retribution's horn
Upon thy judgment do their shadows lie
Framing thy vanity with their servitude
Forsake thy regrets, those mortal tears shed
Fruitlessly dividing the indivisible
Tearing asunder the heavens from earth
From the bastion of thy presumed immortality
Awaken! Awaken from thy slumber!
Whomever hath the stature to withstand me
Shall inherit tomorrow's throne
But Beware, O noble heart
For the wind of judgment rises swift
Inciting the coals upon thy barren hearth
Promising thy consumption
O tempered flame, dost thou possess
The mettle to bring resolution to thy ageless strife?
For I shall descend upon thee
Driven like the chaos within the storm
I shall descend upon thee
Until the burning fire of destiny surrenders thee unwillingly
And mine's the whisper that you shall heed
When thy hour of doom shall call.”*

The roar of the wind rose in response to Zorr's litany as thunder challenged overhead. A looming shadow overtook the sun, casting the city in complete darkness. Picard looked beyond the figure and saw that both Terros and Foemos had eclipsed the sun, aligning themselves with Zorr's fury. Even the aura surrounding Zorr seemed to grow dim as if his black eyes absorbed all light around them.

Only Zorr remained visible in the night, his rage continuing to invoke Wendor's retribution. The wind cloaked him in majesty, the darkness shrouded him in beauty. Devastation hung from his brow and condemnation from his hands.

“Beware mortal! Lest thou suffer the shadow of your world cast by my vacancy. For I am the ethereal luster of virtue's pearl!”

Zorr's voice rose above the thunder, transcending the violent storm that he had conjured. As the moons fulfilled their conjunction, Wendor was plunged into perpetual darkness. Lightning flashed overhead, exposing Zorr only in disjointed images underneath the emerald strobe. He withdrew from his invocations and stood as stone underneath the tempest before the darkness overtook him.

When the lightning struck again, Zorr was gone.

With Zorr's departure the storm subsided, bereft of its heart. The disenfranchised clouds scattered across the tamed sky. As the wind resigned itself to a whisper, the sun slowly revealed itself throughout the unfolding darkness. The storm faded almost as quickly as it had gathered.

Picard raised himself from the ground and began to dust off his uniform when the sound of advancing steps forced him to turn. Through the haze of sand, he saw Shalayus and Troi approaching him from the T'aghe Lindril. Together they hastened through the storm's wake to join the captain.

Picard tapped his communicator. “Picard to Riker – Will, can you hear me?”

“Yes, Captain. What's going on down there?” Riker asked.

“I'll explain later,” Picard promised. “Lock on to my coordinates and prepare three to beam up.”

Suddenly, Shalayus withdrew from the group and thrust her hand to Picard's chest. The captain looked down and saw that she was holding Sparr's phaser.

Picard's gaze lingered upon the weapon before slowly lifting to meet Shalayus' eyes. “Belay those orders, Number One.”

“I'm sorry, Captain,” Shalayus professed. “But there will be only two leaving the planet. My place is here.”

“Shalayus, I can't let you remain upon the planet,” protested the Captain. “Your safety is my responsibility.”

Shalayus nodded, fully anticipating Picard's obligation to her. "That is why I have this, Captain," nodding to the phaser. "You are released from your responsibility," she said before lowering the phaser.

"I do not understand. What do you hope to accomplish by remaining?"

"Today is the Day of Reclamation, Captain," she said. "Today, my people shall be redeemed for the sins of our past. The ancient Wendorians were not the benefactors of the galaxy as your Dr. Creet assumed. In truth, we distrusted the neighboring worlds, despised all but our own kind. By comparison they were nothing less than brutal savages. We had feared that they would look upon the technological marvels of Wendor and long for the wealth of our planet.

"The creation of the F'Dar was the fruit of those fears, a means to guard Wendor from the ambition of the other races. With the Hand of Heaven, we scanned the heavens to identify potential threats and rivals. And with the Hammer – the means to wipe them out before they could possibly become a threat. But as the years passed, there were those in power who argued that Wendor was destined to rule over other worlds, that we had a responsibility to bring order to chaos of the galaxy. The provinces soon became divided, until our planet was thrust into a global war.

"The conflicts grew crueller, the atrocities more savage. Many pondered if we had fallen so far into brutality that we relinquished our rights to survive as a race. Ultimately, the Hammer of God was turned upon its own people in punishment. Some believe that it had somehow activated itself – some technical glitch. Some say that it was our own misdeeds that reawakened the Huundrayel. In a single day, billions were killed. And those that survived suffered the legacy of the akreon. It systematically corrupted our ecosystem and compromised the technology that had become the foundation of the Wendorian way of life. Many simply perished because they couldn't adapt to the demands of a more primitive existence.

"It was only then that we explored the cosmos, forced to open ourselves to those species that we had once held in contempt. A hundred ships were sent out with the last of the Wendorians, the survivors of our greatest shame. They became the teachers and guardians of the children of the galaxy, hoping to right our wrongs through them. But most of the

colonies didn't survive. The judgment of Anthim had been swift, and my people lapsed into obscurity. For millennia, we had lived with the shame of what we did to ourselves, the anguish and hopelessness that ultimately destroyed our world and decimated our people. The Huundhraeyl continues to exist as the legacy of this grief, a ghost of our despair.

"To atone for these sins, we sentenced ourselves to exist in poverty and isolation, without any technology. We have awaited centuries for the promise of Zorr's return and the fulfillment of his prophecy."

"But that creature isn't Zorr," protested the captain. "It's some murderous nightmare."

"Captain, you have heard the faith of my people, but have you not listened? Light can only be gifted to the darkness. Strength can only be achieved where there is weakness. And it is only within the most desperate of hearts can redemption be found. Zorr is Zorr. Zorr is Huundraeyl. He is the Malukir – the One of Many. He is also your fallen captain. His reach spans across nothing less than the summit of Heaven to the abyss of the Gorgoroth, with all of Creation within his grasp. His redemption is delivered not with a blessing, but with a curse."

"A duality of truth," whispered Picard.

"So has it always been, so will it always be – since the dawn of days when the Dalikor took her first flight towards eternity. Redemption is something earned, Captain, not blindly given. Never forget the opportunity that the Malukir has provided to both of our people."

"You will be destroyed either way," Picard said.

"Yes, Captain," she acknowledged. "But in my death, I will attain what generations of my kind have been unable to achieve in life, a life that began and ended in shame. The spirit of Wendor will rise again from the grave, like the vision of the Dalikor. If I am successful, I will have earned the reclamation of my kind. I will become the Jadi K'Tor."

"Jadi K'Tor," Picard repeated, remembering the misshapen ship that had delivered the pilgrims of Wendor to Sindar's sanctuary. *The aftermath and the beginning.*

"I wish you the fulfillment of your promise," the Captain said.

Shalayus raised her open hand and tenderly touched behind Picard's ear with a single stroke, almost a maternal one. The once young woman seemed incredibly old, no longer a girl on the threshold of adulthood. She was a wizened being, the heir to millennia of genius and

power that surpassed Picard's understanding of mortality. He suddenly felt inadequate by contrast.

"A don nala tu etserttia, Picardira-kahn," she said in parting.

Picard remained focused upon her as he tapped his communicator pin. "Number One, two to beam up."

"Yes, Captain."

As the glow of the transporter beam began to consume him, Shalayus abruptly turned from them and hastened towards the citadel. Alone, she confronted the fate that Zorr promised, the fate that her people had silently dreamed of for centuries.

As she left, the wind offered one final assault, filling the tomb of the city with its flute-like call. A voice rose from underneath it, flooding Picard's ears before he disappeared from the planet.

"You will be my messenger!"

CHAPTER TWENTY

The doors to the turbolift parted and Picard entered the bridge with only a casual glance at the looming Warbird. Worf silently appraised the captain's demeanor and managed a smile from behind his tactical station. The grace of command that Picard exhibited while confronting a crisis recalled images of the *Nukh'm Nsu*, the legendary feudal warlords of the Klingon Middle Ages.

While facing insurmountable opposition, the *Nukh'm Nsu* commanded their forces with unwavering serenity. According to legend, the warlords had discovered *Huurinkor*, the path that transcended the barrier of mortality and allowed the living to join Kahless in Sto-Vo-Kor. Although ascribing such an inherent Klingon quality upon an outsider would be considered heresy, watching the dignity that the dauntless captain exuded filled Worf with no less of a comparison.

But Worf's musings were interrupted with the realization that Shalayus had not followed the captain onto the bridge. He winced at the omen of her glaring absence, fully certain that if she was anywhere aboard the *Enterprise* she would have insisted upon being on the bridge as the final minutes ran out on Thorin's reprieve. *If she was aboard...*

As Picard approached, Riker shifted his position, relinquishing the command to the captain. The First Officer greeted Picard with a single nod, his eyes lingering upon the captain's battered uniform.

As Riker studied Picard's bleak expression, he perceived a very different captain than Worf. Although Picard maintained the disciplined veneer for the benefit of his crew, Riker knew the captain – knew what it meant to be in command and the importance of maintaining appearances.

He also knew that with each visit to the hellish planet, Picard had grown increasingly withdrawn. Riker had reviewed the captain's logs at great length, noting the dispassion of each entry. But he could also sense the growing despondency resulting from each episode – from the shrewdness of Thorin's stratagems to the omens of Zorr. From the controversy surrounding Helsing to the revelations of his experience with the Hand of Heaven. Each encounter had darkly touched Picard, quietly plundering his sense of hope.

As the grim captain reclined into his chair, he began to rub his hands together, trying to summon the determination to confront the doom that mercilessly awaited him.

“Captain, the *Krameede* is powering her engines,” reported Worf.

“Hold position, Lieutenant. Red Alert. Arm phasers, load torpedo bays.”

The Warbird headed directly towards the *Enterprise*, its crown driven by vengeance. Picard was suddenly filled with Thorin’s apocalyptic vision of the Romulan god Tamatra unleashing the twin warbirds to conquer the universe.

The *Krameede* accelerated, vanquishing the distance between them with frightening speed. Picard was aware of Riker’s shift in attention away from the view screen, his silent appeal for the captain to order the *Enterprise* from the Warbird’s path. In another instant, the time to maneuver the ship from danger would be lost.

Just as the Warbird’s mandible was set to descend upon the *Enterprise*, smashing the fore hull of the Saucer Module to pieces, it abruptly arced upwards. The *Enterprise* shook with thunder as the *Krameede* continued its narrowly close ascent, forcing subspace interlocking. It proudly displayed its plumage of destruction before the image of the Warbird wavered, fading into a translucent haze.

“The *Krameede* has cloaked, Captain,” said Worf.

Riker sighed with momentary relief. “That was too close. He’s either very confident or very insane. One miscalculation and both ships would have been obliterated.”

Picard nodded with an equal mix of esteem and chagrin. “It would appear that the senator has deceived us again. He is far more capable at commanding a ship than he has led us to believe.”

“Captain, I recommend that we bring the ship directly over either of Wendor’s magnetic poles,” suggested Riker. “It won’t be as effective as a cloak, but it may compromise their sensors enough to shift the odds a little more in our favor.”

Picard negated with a single head shake. “No Will, we’re maintaining our position. As long as that shield is extended, the F’Dar is under Federation authority. Thorin will have to test the full potential of this ship before I forsake that claim to hide from them. Besides, if we

drop the shield to change position, the F'Dar will return under Zorr's control, and he may prove a deadlier threat than the Warbird."

"Warbird decloaking behind us, Captain. Firing disruptors!" alerted Worf.

"Fire photon torpedoes! Dispersal pattern Vienna!" shouted Picard before the *Enterprise* was rocked with the impact of several disruptor bursts.

Two photon torpedoes soared from the ship's aft launcher, the momentarily decloaked *Krameede* directly in their path. The first shell struck the Warbird, sending the ship reeling from the assault. But the second torpedo drifted harmlessly into dead space, as the Warbird returned its precious energy to the ship's cloak and glided out of danger.

"Damage report."

"The shield generators for the warp nacelles have been damaged," assessed Worf. "Attempting to compensate by realigning the distribution of the remaining grids... Shields have been reduced to sixty-eight percent."

"Sixty-eight?" Riker echoed with disbelief.

Picard's eyes squinted, his eyes dilating from the magnitude of his adversary's prowess. "He knew precisely where to hit us. I would like to know how the senator has come to possess such detailed knowledge of the design of the Federation flagship."

"Captain, we are being hailed by the *Krameede*," announced Lieutenant Worf.

"On screen," responded the captain.

The view of Wendor faded as the *Krameede*'s bridge appeared, eclipsing the receding image of the silent world. A hush fell over the bridge as Picard suddenly rose from his chair, confronting the screen's revelation as if to answer his question.

"Captain, did you believe by stealing the F'Dar that you left me behind like a wounded animal cowering in fear?" Zorr asked, playfully rocking from side to side in the Warbird's command chair. To his right, Thorin stood in full bloom, completing the lethal alliance. "You forget Picard, I am the catalyst of truth, the F'Dar is only a means. Did you think that you would forestall the doom that awaits you, the doom you have ceaselessly labored upon since your meager existence began? Today the promise of Zorr will be fulfilled. I pray that you are prepared."

“Zorr, the only consequence that I am prepared for is to meet any challenge that you would make against the Federation,” Picard snapped.

Zorr’s face grew somber. “Release the F’Dar to me and I will end this attack. You cannot hope to withstand me, Picard. You and your ship will be annihilated. Surely the lovely Wendira-kahn has warned you of the consequences of opposing me,” he said while performing a quick head count. “I am surprised that she does not stand with you during this crisis. Is she hiding from my anger in some lonely haunt of your ship, or have you placed her in the brig again?” he mocked.

“This bridge is restricted to Federation Officers during an emergency,” replied the captain, carefully selecting his response.

Zorr’s smile suddenly vanished. “She is not on your ship,” he darkly concluded. “Very clever, Captain Picard. Your oath prohibits you from using the F’Dar, so you send your servant to do your dishonorable deeds. My noble captain...”

Zorr turned to Thorin and the senator leaned closer. “Have your men fire upon the capital city. I want nothing to remain standing.”

“But Zorr,” Thorin protested. “The F’Dar will also be destroyed.”

“No Senator. Our obliging captain has protected the F’Dar for us,” Zorr smiled as he returned to face Picard. “That is unless you would be kind enough to drop your shield and prevent the destruction of the city and the death of the precious Wendira-kahn.”

“Never.”

The Warbird fired a series of short disruptor bursts, pelting Wendor’s capital. As Zorr had predicted, the F’Dar remained intact inside the security of the deflector beam. Worf cursed with rage, slamming a helpless fist against his station in frustration.

The attacking ship released a second assault that buried the legacy of the dead city, the hungry sand eagerly reclaiming the ancient remains. But before the *Krameede* could return to the stealth of its cloak, the *Enterprise* launched a salvo of phaser fire with exacting precision. The Warbird shook from the impact just before it vanished.

Picard closed his eyes for a moment to mourn the loss of Shalayus. The entire city except the shielded main citadel had been destroyed, claiming one more life before dying. The offering appeared to do little to appease the orange world’s lust.

Shalayus's parting words echoed in his mind. *Redemption is something earned Captain...* It finally came into focus, a terrifyingly real and immediate focus. Redemption had nothing to do with forgiveness, but rather survival. The Day of Reclamation was the day of judgment for the Wendorians, a society driven to extinction by its own hand. If Shalayus had succeeded, she would have earned the right for the survivors of her people to endure, maybe even to prosper one day. Now with her death, they were sentenced to lapse into oblivion. It was simply the natural laws of evolution at work, a test to determine if the Wendorian descendants had learned enough from their past, had evolved to earn the privilege of perpetuating themselves. That was the promise of Zorr, the catalyst of truth. The Revolver offered his kind one last chance. But Shalayus had been unsuccessful, signaling the end of her people who had simply failed to meet Zorr's challenge.

But what was happening here meant much more than just the survival of the Wendorians, Picard suddenly realized. *Never forget the opportunity that the Malukir has provided to both our people.*

"Captain, I recommend that we prepare for saucer separation," advised Riker. "The Battle Section can maintain the shield around the F'Dar, while we can engage them with the Saucer Module, giving them two targets to worry about instead of one."

Picard agreed. "Make it so."

The Warbird abruptly appeared upon the main viewer directly ahead, the ghostly apparition flickering from the spatial distortions of its paused cloak. It unleashed several short bursts of disruptor fire directly behind the main bridge. Then it rose and angled its fire, running a straight line across the *Enterprise's* spine.

The starship shuddered from the impact. Inside the main bridge, the crew were violently rocked as the seismic magnitude of each hit rippled across the entire ship.

"Fire all weapons!" ordered the captain, tightly gripping his armrests for stability.

The *Enterprise* answered the attack. A random barrage of photon torpedoes and phaser fire bombarded the *Krameede*, before the attacking ship vanished without a trace.

“Casualty reports coming in on decks twelve and seventeen!” reported Worf. “Saucer Module torpedo launcher has been destroyed. Shield output has been reduced to forty-five percent.”

“Picard to Commander LaForge,” called the captain, his eyes transfixed upon the viewer. The *Enterprise* now depended upon the combined synergy of the remaining deflector network, negating any possibility of a saucer separation. How could Zorr have anticipated their next move?

“Go ahead, Captain,” responded Geordi after a negligible pause.

“Geordi, we need to increase shield output.”

“The only thing that we can do now that would increase performance is discontinue the shield around the F’Dar, Captain. The boost to the main deflector dish is causing a heavy drain on the entire deflector system,” said LaForge. “I could redirect that energy into the grids and get the shields back up to almost seventy percent.”

“That’s not an option, Geordi,” vetoed Picard.

“Captain in about seven minutes, it’s not going to matter any way. We don’t have much time before the Y’selien runs out,” Geordi explained. “The Shilan Tir is almost empty. We’ve exhausted the supply.”

Picard reclined into his chair, leaning his chin into his fist. “Mr. Worf, how much time before the *Excalibur* and the *Endeavor* arrive?”

“Three hours and twenty-seven minutes.”

Riker turned and eyed him curiously. Picard was aware of the silent probing but refused to acknowledge it. “You’re using us to buy time for the Federation,” Riker said in a hushed voice. “You’re not looking to win. You’re only interested in keeping this ship in one piece until reinforcements arrive. I don’t think that we can continue taking this kind of punishment for three more hours.”

Picard closed his eyes. Riker was right. From the onset, Picard could see little hope for victory. The Warbird outgunned them and they were an easy target as long as the ship remained paralyzed holding position over the F’Dar. He was only interested in holding the *Enterprise* together and to maintain its claim upon the F’Dar long enough for the cavalry to arrive. He was willing to risk it all, his ship, his crew.

Shalayus was willing to make a sacrifice for her people, and he would do no less. But this wasn’t the same as Shalayus’s lone act of selflessness. He was responsible for a thousand lives and would be

responsible for a thousand deaths. He had convinced himself that he had the authority, his crew had sworn an oath to die for the cause of the Federation. Perhaps Zorr was right. Perhaps the preservation of life was more important than duty. Perhaps his orders to protect the F'Dar for the Federation's scrutiny was not worth their cost.

"Agreed," said Picard. "Mr. Worf, terminate the deflector beam around the F'Dar and prepare evasive maneuvers. Conn, bring us directly behind Terros and hold position. Let's hope Zorr is enjoying his new command and that his attention is turned away from the F'Dar."

"And if it isn't?" asked Number One.

"If we maintain a close enough position to the moon, I'm hoping that he'll be unable to target the Hammer on us."

As Worf's hands rapidly keyed the controls at his station, a brief melody was produced. The sound of the melody repeated, forming an aria that grew impatient and urgent. "Captain, the controls are not responding."

"What?"

"All main controls have been redirected to the Battle Bridge," Worf informed. "I'm attempting to reroute the computer's command protocol, but all access has been blocked."

"What the hell is going on?" Riker cried.

"Someone has transferred command of the ship," concluded Worf.

"That's impossible!" argued Riker.

"No Will, it isn't," argued the captain. "Our history aboard this vessel has shown that one individual possesses the ability to replicate our voices well enough to fool the computer and reconfigure the computer's command structure," noted Picard. "Computer, what is the location of Commander Data?" he asked.

"Commander Data is located in the Battle Bridge," the computer dutifully replied.

"What is he up to?" cursed Riker. "I don't care what it takes Lieutenant. I want him stopped. Send a security team to the Battle Bridge and tell them to blast a hole through the door if they have to. If Data has lost his senses, we don't stand a chance against that Warbird!"

Picard only shook his head with uncertainty. Whatever Data had planned, he now had complete control over the ship, complete control over the weapons and their only hope for survival.

“Captain, the *Krameede* is hailing us,” said Worf.

“On screen,” Picard barked.

Zorr’s sullen expression was contrasted by Thorin’s zeal. “Captain Picard, what have you done to your ship?” lamented Zorr. “I am not without mercy, Captain. Surrender your ship and crew to the senator. I have his promise that you will not be harmed.”

But before Picard could respond, Data’s voice took control over the communication, echoing throughout the ship. “Infidel! I shall cast thee into darkness, surrender thee to exile. Your evil will be eradicated. Your filth will be cleansed. Behold as the heavens unfold with thy punishment!”

The *Enterprise* fired all weapons into what initially appeared to be a random area of space. But as Picard studied the pattern, it appeared localized to a confined location along the ship’s starboard bow, an area where Data’s positronic mind had extrapolated the *Krameede* to be hiding. At first, it appeared that the android had miscalculated, but then the image of the Warbird flashed into view, its cloak sporadically suspended as the ship’s energy was repeatedly diverted to sustain the attacks upon its shields.

The bridge of the *Krameede* quaked from the assault. Several command stations exploded with a spray of sparks and fire. One Romulan officer was hurled through the air, his lifeless body slamming against the floor. The senator’s arrogant smile vanished.

Zorr remained immune to the destruction around him, his eyes transfixed upon the view screen measuring the potential of this new threat from the *Enterprise*. For a moment, he smiled, a dark and chilling smile. A familiar smile.

“Cast into the shadows from the favor of thy light, I vow to assail thee with my heart’s despite.”

Picard watched hopelessly as Zorr prepared to launch his retaliation. In the pulsating strobe the *Krameede*’s red alert, Zorr appeared to flicker between himself and Sydell. In timed oscillations, the past and present became inexorably bound. It was as if two moments were in some kind of conjunction, as if their lives revolved upon a

circular plain, intersecting the same point in time. Between the promise of a prophet and the grief of a wounded hero. Between the purpose of a vengeful savior and the vengeance of a desperate man.

Zorr's punishment was swift. The Warbird suddenly appeared parallel to the *Enterprise's* starboard side, facing the opposite direction. Zorr launched a dedicated assault upon the starship, unleashing the full power of the *Krameede*. Disruptor fire sliced into the *Enterprise's* hull, just above Engineering. As the *Krameede* continued to circle, it fired another assault upon the rear section, destroying the aft torpedo launcher.

The *Enterprise* reciprocated with a salvo of phaser fire that followed the *Krameede* as it circled in its assault. But the response was not as effective as hoped. Zorr maneuvered the temporary uncloaked *Krameede* dangerously near the rear of the *Enterprise*, just beneath her warp nacelles, momentarily confusing the weapon's systems as the phasers were unable to obtain a positive lock that would assure that the ship wouldn't fire upon itself.

As the *Krameede* came around it feinted with a shift towards the *Enterprise's* port side, before suddenly rising directly above its target, firing a lone disruptor burst that rocked the Saucer Module. The Warbird vanished again.

"Captain, aft torpedo launcher is destroyed. Plasma conduits are severed in forward phaser banks. Outer hull breach on decks thirty-eight and thirty-nine. Numerous casualty reports coming in from those decks. Shields are down to twelve percent."

"Seal off those decks, Lieutenant. Dispatch the damage control teams." Riker instructed.

"LaForge to Bridge."

"Go ahead, Geordi," acknowledged Picard.

"The plasma regulators for the warp coils are not responding. I have to shut down the warp engines before they overload," LaForge dimly reported. "We're also experiencing some thrust imbalance in the impulse engines. I'm trying to hold them together, but if we take another hit, we'll lose them as well. Even if we had control of the ship, we'd be dead in the water. The only thing..."

"Captain," interrupted Worf in a strained voice. Picard turned towards the Lieutenant, sensing the amount of discipline the Klingon had

to exercise to contain his urgency. The alarm in Worf's voice did not go unnoticed by the other officers. An ominous hush enveloped the bridge.

"The ship's auto-destruct sequence has been initiated. We have three minutes."

Picard rose from his chair. "Override!"

Worf returned to his station, rapidly initiating a set of instructions. After a minute he raised his head in defeat. "The computer is not responding to any command made outside of the Battle Bridge."

"Picard to Data. I order you to cancel the auto-destruction sequence and return the ship's control over to me," demanded Picard.

There was a long pause before any reply was made. Perhaps the program that now controlled Data did not believe that the intrusion was worthy of an immediate response. The captain waited, counting out each moment as if it were a slice of eternity.

"Stay your protest. The incubus will suffer for its impurity. We will not be defiled by its lecherous embrace. Abstain! Abstain from the heart of feral darkness. We will eradicate this sin from the grasp of humanity," responded the voice over the communications system. It was clearly Data's voice, but deeper, with enough arrogance to leave an offensive residue in Picard's ears.

"I can feel..."

Picard sighed, only now fully accepting that somehow his Chief Operations Officer's aberrant behavior was the result of some other influence, and not some internal program that had simply run amok. He had to count on the supposition that something of Data remained in the android's active memory. "Data, listen to me. Cancel the auto-destruct sequence. The *Krameede* will detect the ship preparing to destroy itself in time to reach safety. Nothing will be gained by your actions except our deaths."

"A sacrifice must be made, the greater good must be served," the voice argued.

"Damn it! This isn't a sacrifice, it's suicide. It's not a victory, it's defeat," condemned Picard, painfully reminded of his own aborted attempt to sacrifice the ship. Shalayus's sacrifice had been about redemption. But as he stared into his heart with the lucidity that the F'Dar possessed, he had to admit that his sacrifice was motivated by desperation, echoing the anguish of Sydell's past. It seemed that if they

lost the F'Dar to the Romulans, it would be the end of human existence. He had to believe that even if they lost here, the human race would find a way to endure. A machine would not topple the scales upon the doom of humankind. If humanity had truly earned the right to survive in the cosmos, it would be by preserving the preciousness of life, not by coldly calculating the bargaining potential of destroying good to offset evil. His experience with the Hand of Heaven had at least taught him that much.

“There is pain within all,” mourned the voice. “The demon must be destroyed. The pain must cease. I will silence the tears...”

“There is nothing good that will come from our destruction, no justification. Only death,” continued Picard. “When Dr. Soong created you, he endowed you with a sense of morality. Don’t abandon that morality Data, don’t forsake the basic principles that hold the value of life above all else. If you do not cancel the auto-destruct, you will send a thousand beings to their deaths.”

There was a long pause. “I understand,” said the voice. It suddenly sounded like Data.

“Captain, auto-destruct sequence has been canceled,” declared Worf looking up from his station visibly relieved. “Command of the ship has been returned to the Main Bridge.”

“Have the security team put Data into custody,” added Riker. “Just in case he decides to change his mind.”

“I’m receiving a report from the team,” relayed the Klingon. “They have entered the Battle Bridge...It appears that Commander Data has been deactivated.”

But that would have to wait. Picard couldn’t waste another minute. “Conn, takes us behind Terros. Lay in course zero-three-eight, mark zero-seven-seven.”

The starship limped ahead at a fearfully slow pace, the impaired impulse propulsion system reducing the ship to a crawl. Picard’s brow tightened as if trying to mentally boost the ship’s performance. Despite its size, Terros seemed incredibly far away.

The *Enterprise* succumbed to the brunt of two more agonizing disruptor blasts from above. The secondary science station exploded in a hail of sparks. All systems within the bridge blinked and the emergency backup lights were activated. There was a strange silence that filled the ship as it came to a complete stop, frozen in the middle of space.

“Primary life support is down, transferring to emergency backup systems,” Worf grimly announced. “Engineering is reporting that impulse engines are experiencing thermal overload and are offline. Shields are fluctuating.”

“Anything else?” Picard dryly asked.

“The *Krameede* is hailing us again.”

Zorr appeared and studied Picard’s withdrawn expression and shook his head with deep regret. “The time for mercy is gone. The opportunity for surrender has been lost. In my heart, Captain Picard, it would seem that you longed for death. I will not keep you from your appointment any longer.”

Zorr raised himself from the command chair and turned to Thorin and placed a hand upon his shoulder. “Senator, decl cloak the Warbird.”

“But Zorr!” Thorin protested.

“Senator, they are completely vulnerable, virtually without defenses. I have removed their fangs for you, Thorin. To continue to hide behind your cloak would be act of cowardice,” rebuked Zorr. “They fought bravely for their people. Do not condemn them to such dishonor in their time of death. I will allow you to give the command that destroys their vessel. Their legacies are in your hands, don’t disappoint them.”

Thorin conceded with a taunting grin, his satisfaction unabashedly shimmering in his eyes as he assumed the command chair. He gazed upon the *Enterprise* crew with a gloating expression, not possessing the same humility for victory that Zorr embraced. This was not about the codes of battle – it was only a cold result of his protracted array of strategies and calculations.

Thorin nodded at his senior officer just before the transmission was terminated. The Warbird became visible in the distance, opposite of the *Enterprise*’s starboard bow. As the cloak was withdrawn, its wings momentarily radiated with a translucent haze.

“All remaining power to defense systems. Lieutenant, launch all weapons at your discretion,” Picard said.

Worf growled a battle cry and unleashed the *Enterprise*’s final assault. The ship’s remaining supply of photon torpedoes soared through space framed by intermittent phaser fire. But the attack was in vain. Without the demands of the *Krameede*’s cloak, the strength of her shields were virtually intact.

The Warbird continued to slowly approach them, leisurely gliding past the starship's final offensive. Thorin relished this moment, fulfilling his promise to Picard that he would grant the captain a final moment to reflect upon his death and who it was that delivered it.

A few troubled glances were exchanged among the bridge officers, silently acknowledging their predicament. But not a single word was spoken as no one dared to compromise the intensity of the moment. The *Krameede* began to accelerate as it prepared to launch the final rounds of disruptor fire.

Until...

An emerald bolt of lightning struck the Warbird from behind. For an instant, its aft section blinked with a strange effulgence. But the *Krameede* ignored the trifling interruption, continuing instead on its final descent upon the *Enterprise*.

A second, more forceful beam sliced through space, penalizing the Warbird for its neglect. A corona of argent fire ignited its starboard wing, sending the *Krameede* into a spiral. It rolled twice before regaining control. Without further delay, the ship abandoned its attack and glided in a half circle to confront the challenge of its new antagonist.

“What the hell was that?” asked Riker.

Picard only shook his head, sharing the First Officer's uncertainty. “Lieutenant?” he asked, prompting Worf for an analysis. But the Klingon was ignoring the readout on his small display, mesmerized by the magnitude of the mysterious blast when something hit him. The force nearly knocked him to the ground with a rush of vertigo.

“Captain...” he said, bracing himself against his station. “I'm receiving a message from Shalayus.”

Picard turned to face him, his face aglow. “On screen, Lieutenant.”

But Worf only shook his head. “Sir, it is not that kind of message...” he stammered. “She is communicating with me telepathically. She is warning us to leave this system immediately. We don't have much time.”

Picard nodded, beginning to sense the immediacy of the message. “Tell her we can't, Worf. Tell her that our engines are offline.”

Worf looked at his commanding officer completely bewildered. He had no idea how to respond to Shalayus's telepathic message. But

some instinct told him he had to try, told him that their survival depended upon it.

He closed his eyes and immediately placed himself into the same mild trance he used during many of his Klingon rituals. He slowly formed each word in his mind, then spliced together individual images that conveyed their predicament.

He reopened his eyes and turned to the captain. “She says that she understands.”

A moment later, the entire ship was lifted on some kind of invisible wave. It was like a gust of wind that cradled their disabled ship, rocking the inhabitants within its gentle sway. Picard involuntarily gripped his armrests, feeling the *Enterprise* roll beneath him.

It stopped, departing in the same instant that it had appeared. But there was something different about the ship, a familiar hum that was strangely absent just a moment ago.

“LaForge to bridge.”

“Yes, Geordi,” Picard acknowledged.

“Captain, don’t ask me to explain it...” Geordi qualified with wonder. “But the impulse engines are back online.”

Picard smiled, grateful for all of the hours Shalayus had spent studying the design of the *Enterprise*. “Conn, take us out of here. Full impulse.”

The ship obeyed Picard’s command, banking away from Wendor and heading straight for the nearest edge of the Khuln system. Behind them, the orange world seemed to sadly watch their departure.

“*Utsa Lia.*”

“Mr. Worf, switch main viewer to the aft display,” requested the captain.

The main viewer blinked and the screen was filled with the departing view of Wendor. The Warbird continued to hunt for the phantom attacker, ignoring the starship’s withdrawal. The two moons raced along their opposite orbits, positioning themselves around the *Krameede*.

“Captain, I’m detecting enormous amounts of akreon emitting from the moons,” announced Worf. “The entire region of space between them is becoming filled with it.”

“What is she doing?” asked Riker, rising from his chair to confront the enigma. “If she’s setting some kind of trap for the Warbird, it won’t work. Zorr will be able to detect the akreon too.”

Picard kept his silence and offered a single nod that both agreed with Riker’s deduction and confirmed his own silent conclusion. Today was the Day of Reclamation.

The crew continued to watch the spectacle upon the view screen, the image slowly receding as the *Enterprise* distanced itself from the Warbird’s threat.

“*Utsa Lia.*”

Worf was so engaged by the view of the *Krameede* and of the accelerating moons, that the tiny voice in his mind didn’t register.

“*Utsa Liaaaaaaa...*”

Worf immediately closed his eyes, tuning out all else – the heated battle, the loss of life and the grip of death that loomed just beyond them. All that remained was the sadness of the lone call.

“*Farewell, my love.*”

The Warbird reached position above Wendor’s atmosphere, achieving its perigee over the doomed planet. The sibling moons positioned themselves upon either side of it in a silent embrace, spewing their supply of akreon.

Terros emitted another blast that engulfed the Warbird’s crown in emerald fire, a final provocation.

The *Krameede* leaned forward, targeting the lone citadel that held domain over the western continent with exacting precision. It fired a single, prolonged disruptor burst at the target.

The burst pierced the newly formed akreonic cloud, instantly blazing – its magnitude exploded a thousand-fold. The green flare surged with unbridled power, its fury igniting the volatile space, rocketing towards its destination.

It shredded Wendor’s atmosphere, striking its primal fist upon the western continent. For a moment there was only darkness. Then the entire sky above the tower exploded in a verdant rush, the magnitude of the Throne’s destruction igniting the akreon charged atmosphere.

The ensuing cataclysm was unlike anything they had ever witnessed.

As the entire continent was incinerated, the region of atmosphere above it erupted into an emerald flame. The fire spiraled upwards, driven by unspeakable ferocity. The dispirited moons became consumed in the rage of the inferno's lust.

But they did little to appease the fire's hunger. It ripped through space, maddened by the orgasmic rush of its creation. Another explosion rocked Wendor, releasing a second wave of destruction into the air. In the cascading terror of the explosion's chaos, the skeletal remains of the Warbird momentarily rose above the wave, before it was consumed by the fire's rage.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Geordi LaForge assigned three shifts to work around the clock affecting repairs upon the *Enterprise*. The first priority of business was getting the warp engines back online, so that the ship could reach Starbase 237 and tend to its more severe wounds and battered weapons system.

It was four days following their escape from Wendor and the collision of events that ended with the deaths of Zorr, Shalayus, Thorin and forty-three members of the *Enterprise* crew. The healing process had begun, and the anticipated respite was perceived as more than just the restoration of the ship.

The crippled ship continued its pilgrimage deeper into Federation space, returning to the mainstream of the quadrant, closely flanked by the *Excalibur* and the *Endeavor*. With each passing day, LaForge's progress made it increasingly unlikely that the *Enterprise* would be on hiatus for any measurable length of time.

Although Picard kept abreast of the progress of the ship's repairs, he remained virtually invisible to the crew. For all intents and purposes, Riker was in command of the return journey, while the captain remained a recluse in his ready room.

The only person who spoke with the captain at any length was Peldin, continuing the unlikely trend for the laconic admiral. Peldin patiently listened to Picard's detailing of the final events of the F'Dar and the Warbird. But there were other matters to discuss. The captain had new orders immediately following the ship's repairs.

The Sindarians had requested to open a formal dialogue with the Federation. Having been purged of the shame that they had borne for millennia, it was time to begin again. Their single caveat was that they would speak only with Picard.

The captain looked forward to returning to Sindar. He longed to return to the serenity of the Evacca, to hold midnight discussions with Dr. Crete in his peetsu, and maybe even return to crypt of the Nelinmar and explore the ancient treasures that lingered there.

But most of all, Picard wished to visit with the V'Dir and tell her how her daughter spent her final days, and how she met her death. Above

all else, he wanted the V'Dir to know how Shalayus had touched his life in a very unexpected way.

While Romulus mourned the loss of Thorin, the Senate released a brief statement saying only that Thorin died defending the cause of the Empire. There was no other official response, no threat of retaliation against the Federation. As Thorin had grimly predicted, his contemporaries were secretly grateful for his absence, and his demise was welcomed with a collective sigh of relief.

There was a curious footnote that punctuated Peldin's communication. While monitoring subspace communications along the perimeter of the Neutral Zone, Starbase 79 intercepted a cryptic message. An analysis of the signal yielded its origination to be in Wendor's vicinity, only moments after the wave of destruction rocked the planet.

The weak signal needed to be computer enhanced to strip away the distracting layers of random microwave radiation and interstellar static. Peldin replayed the message for Picard, the voice was distant and hollow, barely perceptible above the din of the cosmos.

*“For I have touched the stars
And now the stars have touched me.
Soon I shall touch heaven
And set my soul forever free.”*

Picard found some comfort in the message. In the end, he concluded, Shalayus had attained the redemption for her people. Whether it was some trick of the mysterious akreon or a final legacy of the F'Dar, but her dying thoughts were transmitted across the heavens to hear.

Picard made a personal visit to Worf's quarters one evening, to relay the message in the hope that it would ease the Klingon's pain. But Worf had already accepted the woman's death. She had died as a warrior, and if there was a place in Sto-Vo-Kor for non-Klingons, Worf was certain that she had earned a place among the honored dead. And in her death Shalayus bestowed an honor upon Worf, who was now the custodian of her memory under the rites of *Rhukh T'magh*.

It took several months, but one evening upon the verge of sleep Picard pondered the possibility that the mysterious message may have had a different author.

Deanna Troi had taken a leave of absence since regaining her identity, using the time for much needed rest and reflection. The residue of Zorr's hold upon her still lingered, entrenched in her Betazoid psyche. Picard was sympathetic, recalling his own experience under the influence of the Borg. It was difficult to move forward; difficult to deal with the uncertainty over the ownership of your own memories and thoughts. He knew that Troi's healing process would take some time.

The repair and reactivation of Data became LaForge's second priority. When the android had deactivated himself, several key circuits had become fused. Once Geordi had made the necessary repairs, Data had to undergo extensive testing to ensure that the corrupt program had been erased. It was unfortunate, Picard reflected, that Troi's process could not be so simple.

When his ready-room door beckoned, Picard remained seated at his desk. "Come in."

Data entered the room with a deliberate pace. He approached the captain's desk and remained at rigid attention. "Captain, I am here to inform you of my resignation from Starfleet."

"Your request is denied, Mr. Data," Picard rejected.

"Captain, I did not properly follow your instructions concerning the deactivation of my holodeck program," the android protested. "As a direct result, I placed this ship into mortal jeopardy."

Picard rose from his chair, equaling the level between them. "Data, your error in judgment was a result of your realization that sometimes orders don't always universally apply. You perceived that the holodeck program was almost a lifeform and deserving of certain rights. Don't you see? In your search to understand humans you've taken a step closer in becoming one. For the first time, you surpassed your programming by holding your principles over your instructions. By your failing, you've succeeded in attaining an elusive human characteristic."

"I believe that I understand, Captain," reflected Data. "However, I must pay the price for my error."

"Data, if you've learned anything about humans, I would suspect that it would be that humans never quit. You have served the Federation with distinction for twenty-five years. Don't let this one incident dissuade you. Don't give in to your sense of defeat."

"Like Captain Sydell?"

Picard turned to the view port behind him before answering. “Yes,” he agreed, only now sensing the echo of the stone that Shalayus had cast during their conversation in the brig, a stone finally coming to rest at the bottom of his soul.

Data watched Picard, without understanding the regret that etched his face. “Captain, I am curious to learn how the *Enterprise* was able to escape the explosion. I read the report and it would seem that our impulse engines should not have been operative.”

“Well Data, Shalayus was able to use the power of the F’Dar to repair the engines. If it wasn’t for her efforts, we too would have been destroyed.”

“*A deus ex machina*,” Data observed.

Picard smiled remembering their conversation fifteen days earlier. “And now that your experiment is over, Commander, what have you learned?”

“I am not certain, Captain. I still have not determined if I am endowed with a soul.”

“Data, you must accept one of the greatest challenges of being human,” Picard explained. “It is faith. None of us know for certain if we have a soul that will survive after our bodies have expired. That is the paradox that you simply have to accept if you truly seek to be human.”

“What do you believe, Captain?”

Picard returned his attention to the viewing port. “Data, I think that we are all machines. We are the sum of millions of years of design and testing. Our fundamental materials may be different than yours, but our bodies function the same. But within these machines, we have been entrusted with a solitary flame of creation’s fire. Each of us carries the spirit of our creator, just as you bear the algorithms of Dr. Soong’s legacy. It is this legacy, Data, this spirit that we must keep alive within us, and pass along to each succeeding generation.”

“A ghost in the machine, Captain?” the android asked.

Picard paused briefly, continuing to gaze out the window. For a moment he allowed himself to imagine that he saw two green stars twinkling in the distance.

“Yes, Data. Yes, that’s it precisely.